



No Shade in the Shadow of the Cross by Your Iron Lung

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Summary: A strange string of parties held out in the deep woods of Hawkins, Indiana, plays host to Steve Harrington and his doubts about his future. Every weekend the party is relocated, and somehow Steve is always privy to the knowledge of where it's going to be. There's something weird about them that he can't quite place, and there's something in the woods. Eventual Haringgrove.

1. For the West Coast Dark Ambient Bedroom

Steve found the invitation in his locker after class one Friday in mid-December, jammed up into the grating of the front panel so tightly he hadn't even noticed it. It had almost gone unnoticed entirely until Steve shut the door, where it fell free from the metal plating and fluttered down to the ground in a graceful, see-sawing motion. Thinking it to be a love note or something, he picked it up hastily, but read it over with a frown.

It had held no name, no confession, and hadn't even been hand written. In fact, the only thing that *had* been hand marked on the note was a crude looking map that had been drawn out below the address of a party he'd evidently been invited to. Two long, horizontal marks made with black ink indicated a road, and branching off of it into a bunch of poorly drawn trees was a dotted arrow leading to an 'X'.

Steve looked around the hallway suspiciously after having read it over, as if the person who'd slipped it into his locker would still be conspicuously standing around to ensure that he'd received it. The hall was practically empty, though; no one was paying him any attention as he re-read the card. Flipping the note over, he saw that a big, glossy ' + 0' mark had been embellished on the back.

Of course he'd thought it suspicious; no kid in Hawkins High was *this* creative. Every student there came from the same breed of stock in terms of creativity, but with nothing better to do with his weekend he'd decided what the hell, why not. Worst case scenario, he didn't like what was going on and left. Best case it was an actual party, and he hadn't been to a good one since Halloween; King Steve was raring to get back into the scene.

He slipped the note into his pocket after reading it a third time, noting that the party was being held that Saturday. For the first time in a while, he actually had something to look forward to and was glad he hadn't volunteered his babysitting services for the weekend.

The rest of his day was then spent studying a map, making sure memorized both the route and the address so he wouldn't get lost on

the way. He was dismayed to learn that the mysterious party was being hosted on the outskirts of town, close to where the farmers earned their keep. A chill went down his spine at the realization, a nervous bout of sweat greasing his palms as he stared at the location on the map, caught in a moment of reliving the horror.

His incident with the pumpkin patch and the secret tunnels it harbored were still fresh in his brain, but he'd driven out there all the same, doing his best to ignore his gut feeling that something about this was wrong. It wasn't until he'd parked in line with a few other cars on the side of the road that he thought he probably should have told someone where he was going.

As he left his car and buried himself deeper into the confines of his coat, part of him wanted to bring the bat he now kept stored in the trunk of his car (just in case, always just in case) with him, but knew he couldn't show up with the unwieldy thing in his hands. He was glad at least that he'd had the foresight to bring a flashlight, as the sun had already set. Clicking it on, Steve pulled the invitation out of his pocket and studied the little map before shining the beam into the trees.

"This'd better be good," he muttered, repressing a shiver as the wind blew past. His light found a pair of footprints leading away into the woods, and as he regained his nerve, he followed in after them.

The little map on the note was of absolutely no help. There were no indications of how far he was meant to walk from the road to reach the 'X', and this had Steve running his hands through his perfectly styled hair over and over again until he finally caught snippets of sounds and voices in the distance. He quickened his pace and almost tripped over a root buried in the snow, and that was how King Steve made his grand appearance by stumbling into the party.

All things considered, the party in the woods was actually kind of nice. Yes, it was outdoors, and yes, there were a few inches of snow covering the forest floor, and yes it was technically freezing- but it was quiet. It was peaceful; it was the escape he hadn't known he was looking for. There was a bonfire roaring that had been started well before he'd actually showed up, and the strong, powerful crackling

noises it made were almost loud enough to drown out the asshole who'd brought an acoustic guitar.

Almost.

It wasn't the sort of thing Steve was used to attending, but normality was a hard sought dream that he'd been trying to chase for the better part of a month with very little success.

But there was plenty of free beer for everyone, stuck into rounded mounds of snow around a foldout table someone had set up. On top of that was a stack of red Solo cups and a large bowl of some sort of mysterious punch. It was a party alright, but definitely wasn't a rager.

After he'd recovered from his embarrassment of literally stumbling out of the woods and into the light of the fire, Steve had pried a cup off the top of the stack and scooped it into the bowl. He was two drinks down before he decided to try talking to anyone who was there, but no one he spoke to could answer any of the questions he had. Either they didn't know or were withholding the information from him, but the pleasant buzz he was nursing didn't allow him to think about it too hard.

The only thing he had learned about the gathering was that it was apparently a weekly occurrence and had been going on for at least a month prior to an invitation being sent his way. The location changed every week, and the only way to know where they were going to be held was to know a guy who knew a guy who knew, and that was how they'd been able to keep the parties relatively low-key and off the map.

Knowing that made him feel a bit better about the whole ordeal. The fact that he'd been invited at all came as no surprise to him, since, well, he knew everyone-

Except for most of the people who were there, apparently. A fair majority of the people in attendance were older than he was, prompting him to believe that it must have been some sort of college party, which explained how he didn't know who the hell was hosting the damned thing.

Seated in a foldout lawn chair a few feet away from the fire, Steve finished off his third drink and was getting up to grab another when Billy showed up.

Steve's face had healed without issue from the pummeling he'd received from his hands, but when he saw Hargrove saunter up to the fire, wandering in from the gloom of the woods like some sort of tan, winter specter, a phantom pain in his cheek had him rubbing at it irritably.

Billy hadn't noticed him yet, giving him time enough to quickly scoop up another cupful of the drink on the table and retreat to the darkened edges of the woods where the bonfire's light could barely reach. He'd been enjoying the tranquility of the party up until Hargrove had shown up, and wasn't ready to risk losing that feeling yet.

The bonfire was tall, and managed to illuminate everything in its radius fairly well. The man with the acoustic was set up in its circle of warmth, and Steve found himself beginning to shiver now as he had removed himself from the fire's immediate comfort. He sipped at his drink in the shadows, leaning against the trunk of a tree and wondered what the fuck Billy was even doing there.

This wasn't a party for people like him. It wasn't a rowdy get together for a bunch of horny teens, and it didn't promote the need to be *excessive*, despite the fact that there seemed to be a bunch free drinks literally just lying around, barely buried in the snow. This was a gathering for the 'Johnnathans' of Hawkins and the exiled king of Indiana; a place where Billy certainly didn't belong.

There was no keg, no dancing, and no music, save for that *motherfucker* fingerpicking a tune by the fire. There were hardly even any women, and the few that were there were already with a guy of their choosing, and even *then*, most of those couples had already left. But there Billy was regardless, exhaling a large plume of smoke as his boots crunched loudly through the snow and towards the fire.

His eyes scanned the gathering curiously, chin raised just slightly as he ascertained whether or not anyone of interest was actually there. If it turned out that he'd driven all the way out to the middle of

bumfuck nowhere to then freeze his ass off wandering around the woods alone at night trying to *find* the damned party, he was going to be pissed. Which to say he wasn't already, but as he looked around, squinting to make out faces in the fire's flickering light, he found he didn't actually recognize anyone.

"Buncha artfags," he muttered, losing some of the pompous swagger he'd walked in with.

Flicking his cigarette away into the snow, he made his way to the table and saw the beers poking up from the snow and crouched down low to pick one up. He popped the top with his teeth and nearly downed the thing in one go.

Similar to Steve's experience, he had also found a note in his locker the previous day. Billy hadn't thought much of it, and had almost thrown it away before Tommy began lamenting to him about how *he* hadn't gotten an invite. He didn't care much for the mysterious aspect of it, but did like the idea of going to something exclusive for once, and reveled in the idea of having been hand-picked to attend.

Looking at the others who had also apparently made the cut, Billy found himself scoffing. He'd never be caught dead socializing with most anyone who was there, but hey, a free drink was a free drink and he'd already used the gas to drive out there. Tossing his empty bottle off into the woods aimlessly, he grinned when he heard the glass break against a tree. He bent down to grab up another one, and as he rose up from the snow, he saw the bonfire light up a silhouette of hair molded up into a long and messy quiff. He turned to get a better look, and there, lurking in the shadows he met Steve Harrington's gaze.

"Fuck," Steve mumbled, turning away as Billy shot a leering grin his direction. He exhaled a heavy sigh and steeled himself as best he could by chugging down the rest of whatever the hell was in his cup in one long gulp. He could physically feel the good mood he'd built up begin to leave him.

Seeing this made Billy chuckle lowly to himself. Perhaps this excursion into the woods hadn't been a waste after all. He drank from his beer greedily before stalking towards where Steve was lurking,

dethroned and outcast. The sight of him hiding, yes *hiding* from him in the shadows brought him more warmth than the fire's heat did.

"Harrington," he purred, sauntering up to him with his chest puffed out and head cocked to the side.

"Hargrove," Steve said tensely, pointedly making an effort to not meet his eye.

Billy's tongue darted out to lick over his lower lip for a moment, relishing the way Steve was doing his best to ignore him. The two of them stood together in silence for a moment, with Steve pretending Billy wasn't looking at him like he'd already won a fight that hadn't been started yet.

"Can you believe that guy?" Billy said after a minute, prompting Steve to finally turn to look at him.

Billy nodded his head towards where the guitarist was sitting, still playing his crappy rendition of acoustic Beatles songs. Despite himself, Steve couldn't help but snort out a bit of a laugh. Finally, it seemed as though they saw eye to eye on something.

"Right?" Steve said, hiding his smirk behind the lip of his empty cup. "He couldn't have at least, like, tried playing some Rolling Stones instead?"

"The Beatles fucking suck," Billy agreed, and that was how it started.

Without the need to grandstand their usual machismo for an audience of their peers, it turned out that they *almost* got along. They wound up talking shit about the douche on the guitar until Billy eventually left him to confront the guy and grab them more drinks. The guitarist left in a huff, but it was relieving not to hear that annoying twang and squeal that came from someone who half-knew how to play guitar.

There was no way to tell when the party ended, exactly, but after a majority of the people who had been there crept away, Steve figured it was time to head out as well. He didn't know how long he had stayed standing in the shadow of the bonfire, breathing in the

same chilled air as Billy and just *talking* with the guy, and found he was disoriented by this lack of knowledge. When he turned to leave, though, Billy went with him, and they drunkenly navigated their way out of the woods together silently.

It took Steve longer to find his way out than it had taken him to find his way in, but as they progressed, guided only by the dim, yellowed light of his flashlight, he thought he caught a glimpse of something hidden by the brush and trees of the woods. When he swung his light around to check, the light illuminated what looked to be a pair of bright red eyes.

"Th' fuck you lookin' at, you ass? I almost walked into a fucking tree," Billy seethed, reaching out to grab and redirect the flashlight to shine it back in front of them.

"You managed to avoid them on the way in just fine," Steve snapped, and quickly pointed the flashlight back at the spot where he thought he'd seen something shine.

If there had been something there, it was gone now, and that left him feeling uneasy. He forced himself to believe that what he'd seen had simply been the eyes of a coyote or some other small game predator, but the idea that it had been another monster from the Upside Down wouldn't leave his mind. His grip around the flashlight tightened, but he kept it steady even as the rest of his body began to quake gently. What he really had to remember, he told himself, was that those *things* that had hunted him before hadn't had eyes, and whatever he'd thought he'd seen a moment ago did.

The gate was closed, the monsters were gone, and he was safe, goddammit; *he was safe*.

2. We Kno Who U R

They didn't talk about it on Monday.

With an audience of people to impress, Billy had reverted back to being the primary antagonist of Steve's life and only interacted with him long enough to throw snide, arrogant remarks at him during gym and whenever they had practice. It had burned at first, but then, really, what else had Steve expected to happen? That after one night of mutually trash-talking some poor disillusioned guitarist that they would become, what, *friends* or something? Maybe not, but at the very least Steve had thought that perhaps Billy would've been a little less of a thorn in his side.

"Where you at, Harrington?" Billy taunted on the court, breathing out his words between harsh pants for air. "Still lost in the woods?"

It hadn't taken them long before they went back to biting at each other's throats, constantly trying to one up the other in a display of petty dominance that sometimes left Steve feeling exhausted from the repetitiveness of it all. By the end of the week, the temporary truce he'd formed with Billy at the party had been forgotten entirely.

That Friday, he found another invitation in his locker tucked into the same place as the note he'd gotten the previous week. He'd known where to look for it this time, and part of him had been expecting it as he gingerly tugged it free from the grating it'd been wedged in. The same lack of detail and a different map were printed upon it, and when he flipped it over, the '+0' from before was adorned on the back. Tracing his finger along the indented mark, his brow furrowed as he puzzled over what it meant. It was the only thing that had remained the same when compared to his previous invite.

Someone in the hall called his name as they walked by, reminding him of where he was. Hurriedly, Steve tucked the note into his wallet and flashed a wave to whoever it was that had greeted him. Something about the note demanded secrecy, and even though he wasn't sure why, he felt as though he were meant to keep the invitation secret.

Suddenly nervous, he got what he needed from his locker and shut it, hurrying past his schoolmates so he could get home and figure out where the next party was going to be.

There were less cars parked on the side of the road this time when he pulled up. Another snowfall had taken place overnight as Friday lapsed into Saturday, and the roads this far out in the country hadn't been cleared yet. It had been a hellish drive that had almost ended with his car sliding sidelong into a ditch once he'd passed through the salted roads, making Steve wonder if this party was really worth all the effort he put into attending. Hell, he wasn't even sure he'd be able to get the BMW back onto the road once he'd parked on the shoulder, four-wheel drive be damned.

He pulled the card out of his wallet and turned the overhead light in his car on, letting the engine idle as he studied it. The arrow on his new invitation was even more ambiguous than the last one had been, and only vaguely seemed to twirl into the cluster of triangles on sticks that indicated he needed to travel into the woods to reach the 'X'.

It wasn't much to work with, but Steve figured that if he'd been able to find the party from last week without any real problems, then he'd be able to find this week's as well.

Cutting the engine, he zipped up his coat and got out, stepping into a rise of snow that almost overtook his ankles. The cold immediately swarmed him, biting viciously at the vulnerable spots on his face and making him wish he'd brought a scarf along with him. Half-tempted to get back into the warmth of his car and drive away, Steve turned his flashlight on and stood in place for a moment as he took in his surroundings.

They were near cow country this time, still out on the outskirts of Hawkins but farther away now from the dreaded pumpkin fields and the secret tunnels they contained. Catching sight of a patch of disturbed snow on the embankment across the road, he turned his light towards it and began to make his way over. With his mind made up, he followed after the man-made trail and began his trek into the forest.

The darkness of the woods was strong and overtook him almost immediately. He kept his flashlight trained on the ground as he walked, letting the light saunter back and forth with each step, casting its beam around lazily. The cold made him shiver as his shoes crunched noisily through the underbrush, and the thought that he ought to be treading carefully- silently- after the encounter with the Mind Flayer's army spawned a weak feeling of apprehension in his gut.

He didn't *want* to be quiet, though; part of him felt like if he fell down into that habit now, then he would never be able to outgrow his fear of the monsters that had come from the Upside Down. It wasn't the right time of year for bears to be out, and nothing else that lived in the woods could hurt him as long as he wasn't being an idiot when it came to fucking around with the wildlife.

Still, the unsettling feeling that he might run into *something* out there cautioned his steps. Annoyed with himself, he began to go out of his way to step on large twigs and sticks that peaked up out of the snow. He purposefully stepped down on them hard enough to elicit loud and satisfying snaps. It was almost cathartic, but didn't do much to settle his nerves. His fingers that were wrapped around the flashlight handle kept twitching, wishing they were holding the handle of his bat instead.

As the flashlight continued to bob around, Steve had to keep himself from looking out into the dark parts of the woods that his light couldn't reach. He remembered the way his light had caught site of a pair of eyes from his last excursion into the trees, and he wasn't sure how he'd handle himself if his light *did* pick up on something that shined like that again. At least then he'd been with Billy, but now he was alone and unsure if he'd be able to handle seeing something like that on his own, despite whatever he told himself to the contrary.

The moon wasn't quite full yet, and didn't offer much in terms of natural lighting. All he had was his flashlight, and even then it was dim and tarnished with age. He took a step forward, and stopped when a loud snapping sound reached his ears.

Without even having to look down, he knew already that he had not stepped on anything that would have snapped so loudly. Something

else was in the woods with him, and was close enough to be heard.

His skin began to crawl underneath his coat, forcing a ragged shudder out of him. There was a strong urge to look back the way he'd come just to be sure there was nothing there following him, but if he *did* see something, what then?

"Just a fucking coyote or some shit," he whispered under his breath. "More scared of me than I am of it."

Scowling deeply, he pulled the card out again and began to study it, staring hard at the deeply etched marks. A muscle in his neck spasmed as he turned the note forward and back, willing it to produce a more reliable guide for him to follow than a poorly made pen drawing and someone else's prints in the snow. Nothing about it changed, though, and Steve sighed.

That was when he noticed that the tracks he'd been following were gone.

He stared blankly at the fresh, unmarked snow that led onwards and away from. The sense of dread he'd felt earlier returned to curdle itself deep in the pit of his stomach when he saw that he'd lost his way.

"What the fuck," he mumbled, having no idea of when he'd lost sight of the trail he'd been following. He turned around in a slow circle, but there were no tracks anywhere for him to follow save for the ones he'd already made. Swallowing down his panic, he fumbled the card back into his pocket and began to backtrack, hoping he'd just missed a turn while he was studying the map.

'I'm not lost in the woods,' he thought to himself, repeating it over and over again in his mind like a mantra of peace. *'I'm not, I'm not.'*

He was walking so fast that he'd almost broken into a jog before he realized what he was doing and managed to collect himself. He felt like an idiot for panicking as much as he was, but all the same he made himself stop to take in several deep, long, calming breaths. Bent over with his hands on his knees, he focused on his breathing for a solid minute. When he found himself ready to stand, he ran a

hand through his hair and caught site of a pair of tracks tucked off to the side between a pair of large trees. Relief overtook him as he made his way towards them, a shaky grin on his face as he shone his beam on them.

"Knew I just went too far," he said, but as he got closer to them, his smile fell away.

There was something off about them; they were cut too deep into the snow, stretched too long, and looked too animalistic to have been made by some teenager. Frowning, Steve placed his own foot beside one to compare and was surprised by the overwhelming difference in size. A single print was almost as long as his arm. He bit down on the panic that suddenly struck him again out of nowhere, barely able to hold it back as he crouched down to maybe ascertain how fresh they were when he heard the sound of snow crunching slowly, *carefully*, behind him.

His mouth went dry as his heart began beating at a much quicker pace. Memories of his fight in the junkyard surrounded by the pack of Demo-Dogs rose unbidden to the forefront of his mind, and he had to force himself to believe that it wasn't a Demo-Dog behind him, no way could it be a Demo-Dog, when whatever was stalking him stopped. Rising up to his full height, he whipped around quickly and flung his flashlight in the direction he'd heard the steps coming from.

There was nothing.

Unable to keep his hand steady, he flicked the shaking flashlight all around him, dragging it over the tall, spindly tree trunks with his feet nearly tripping over themselves in an effort to just *see* what the hell was going on around him.

"Is there someone out there?" he called out uncertainly, to which he got no reply.

Something moved in the periphery of his vision as he turned; a dark, massive shape he'd thought to have been a fallen log suddenly jerked itself out of position at the sound of his voice. It moved too quickly for his eye to follow it, making Steve's heart leap up into his throat as he tried to track the direction the shadow hidden amongst the darker

spaces between the trees had gone. When he turned towards where he'd projected it to have moved, he sensed that whatever had been creeping up behind him was now practically on top of him.

His blood went cold as he turned with a shout, shining his flashlight directly into Billy Hargrove's cackling face. It lit up and became pocketed by the kind of deep shadows kids liked to use when they told ghost stories around a campfire, alighting his malevolent eyes fiercely. Steve lost his footing in the snow as he stumbled backwards and fell on his ass, dropping his flashlight in his surprise. His heart was beating so fast he thought that it might give out.

"Damn, Harrington, thought I told you to plant your feet," Billy said, his lips cascading upward into an amused smirk.

It took a moment of him sitting there, chilling his ass in the snow before the panic he'd felt rearranged itself into anger. He stood up quickly and made a move to shove Billy backwards, but ended up almost slipping and falling again when Billy easily side-stepped him.

"The fuck's your problem, Hargrove?!" he shouted, unable to keep his voice from shaking with the stress. The outburst just made Billy's smirk grow wider, showing off all his bright, white teeth.

Turning away stiffly, Steve bent over to retrieve his flashlight and shined it back to the place where the strange tracks had been, only to find now that they'd been disturbed and erased completely by his fall. Whatever else he had seen lurking in the dark was gone as well, and the tense feeling he'd held in his shoulders dissipated as they slumped, the worry slowly creeping out of him as he rounded back on Billy when he spoke.

"Poor little Harrington afraid of the dark?" he cooed, his voice rumbling deeply from out his chest.

"Fuck off; what the hell are you doing out here?" Steve asked, scowling as he wiped both the flashlight and the seat of his pants clean.

"Same's you, I figure." Billy sauntered closer towards him, his tongue flicking out of his mouth in that odd way he did when he found

something funny. "Got invited."

"Not exactly your kind of scene though, is it?" Steve mumbled, stepping away from Billy as he resumed his search for the trail he'd somehow missed before. Vaguely, somewhere up ahead and off to the side, Steve could hear the tinny sounds of someone playing the guitar and wondered why he hadn't been able to hear that before.

He trudged towards it without waiting for a reply, turning his flashlight forward.

Behind him, Billy chuckled and followed after him.

"No, it's not," he agreed as he fell in line beside Steve, shooting him a sidelong glance. "But I could say the same for you."

"I don't owe you an explanation," Steve bit out, side-eyeing Billy with a mean look. A year ago, he would have been right, but Steve had changed a lot since then. If he were being honest, this sort of party *was* starting to become more his scene. "I guess I just find the change of scenery kind of nice."

"And what a great change it is!" Billy exclaimed sardonically, throwing his arms out wide to gesture at the forest surrounding them. "Come one, come all; experience the joy of freezing your balls off to smell the *au natural* scent of cow shit first hand!"

"Why the fuck do you keep coming out here then?" Steve asked. "Why bother if it's all just bullshit to you?"

Billy dropped his arms and burrowed his hands deep into the pockets of his leather jacket, a stony look of anger etched deeply into his face.

"There ain't shit else left to do in this hick town," he said bitterly.

The man with the guitar stopped playing as soon as he saw Billy step into the fire's light. It was an act of submission that Steve was sure got Billy off in his free time, judging from the absolutely delighted look that had overcome his face. Steve left him there, and went to the table that had been set up with cups and drinks.

The party that night played out much the same way it had last week, only this time Steve didn't have to hide away from Billy. Not that he *had* been hiding before, but now he could sit comfortably in the fire's warmth and drink contentedly without worrying about a fight breaking out between them. His scare in the woods was pushed out of his mind as the few people who were there formed up in a circle around the bonfire, sitting on chairs and tree stumps with drinks in hand to chat casually with one another.

Billy, spurned by a girl he'd attempted to flirt with after they'd shown up, sat beside him begrudgingly, angrily glaring into the flickering orange lights of the fire with a half-drunk beer in his hand. Not quite drunk (but well on his way to *being* drunk), Steve studied his profile and was caught staring at the earring that dangled from his left ear when the person beside him offered him a pipe.

"You smoke?" The guy asked as Steve took it.

"Depends. What is it?" Steve replied, eyeing the pipe suspiciously. It didn't *look* like a crack pipe, but his knowledge of such things was so limited he wasn't too sure of himself. At the very least, there weren't crack rocks packed into the bowl.

The man only smiled and shrugged, passing him a lighter.

"It's good."

"If you're not gonna hit that, Harrington, I will," Billy said, and began to reach over to take it from him.

"Fuck you," Steve snapped and lit up without a second thought.

He took a deep drag and almost started coughing as the harsh smoke filled his lungs. He held it for as long as he could before exhaling roughly, the force of the repressed coughs making his eyes water. Beside him, Billy snorted and took the pipe and followed suit, taking a deep hit before passing the pipe on to whoever was sitting next to him.

It made several rounds around the group seated by the fire, each of them passing it along after everyone had taken a hit. Steve still wasn't

sure what it was he was smoking, but whatever it was in combination with all the alcohol he'd drunk had begun to make him feel really, really good. Having smoked weed before with Tommy and Carol, he knew that wasn't what was in the pipe. This was stronger, somehow, and had a distinctly acrid taste that left him constantly licking his lips in an attempt to clear it from his mouth.

A contented look had stretched out across his face as he lounged back, enjoying the heat of the fire radiating over his body. One look at Billy told him that he was feeling just as content as Steve was. With his legs spread wide, head lolled back and eyes half open, Billy sat grinning stupidly at nothing.

There must have been a mild sort of hallucinogen laced in with what they were smoking, though, for every once in a while Steve thought he could see something blurry lurching around in the darkness just outside the proximity of the fire. It would have unsettled him had he not been properly wasted.

Someone was re-packing the bowl every time it went around the circle, so that each time it came back to Steve it was full and ready to be smoked. Whoever was doing it was being stealthy about it though, as he hadn't been able to catch anyone in the act as he tracked the pipe in its rotation around the group.

It was in the hands of a girl sitting two spots over when he first noticed that there was something odd about the piece. In the wavering light of the fire, it almost seemed as though the pipe had grown in size, nearly doubled in the palm of the girl's svelte hand from the last time he'd had it. His mind tried to alert him to the change; tried to get him to question how it could have done something like that, but he was feeling too lethargic to do anything other than watch as she took her hit.

He blinked as the girl brought it to her lips, dipping the lighter's flame to the bowl and inhaling. Then it was in the hands of the boy next to him, and Steve couldn't take his eyes off of it. It really *had* grown in size, he realized. The dreadful, creeping feeling he'd carried in with him from wandering around alone in the woods was trying to manifest itself in his psyche again as the boy took his hit and then passed it off to Steve.

Holding it in his hands, he noticed that the pipe felt... strange. His chest tightened as his fingers clutched something soft, too afraid to look down to see what it was he'd been given. Stroking a finger along the side of what was *supposed* to have been a simple pipe, he realized that whatever he was holding was now covered in- in what, fur?

No one in the circle seemed to be aware that the pipe had completely changed its shape, which only served to frighten him more. Billy was giving him a queer look as he clutched it tightly in both hands, breath hitching as he teetered towards the brink of hyperventilation.

"Harrington," he heard Billy say testily, but the sound of his quietly rumbling voice felt far away as he finally hazarded a look at what he was holding.

He'd never felt more alone than he did in that moment when he saw that what he was clutching in his hands was a disembodied wolf's head, it's large, white eyes rolling in their sockets to look up at him. The fire, circle, and people he'd been sharing it with all seemed to melt away as a low pitched groan began to emit from out of the wolf's mouth.

He couldn't think; couldn't even *move* he was so paralyzed with fear. In that moment where he made eye contact with the head, he desperately wished that Billy or *someone* impatient enough would just snatch the thing away from him. The wolf began to growl then, the skin around its maw bunching up around its nose to expose all of its teeth, saliva leaking out into the palms of his hand. He wanted to drop it, or throw it into the fire, or do *anything* except hold it, but his fingers were wrapped up so tightly in its fur that he could only match the growl with a whine of his own. The wolf's head stared at him angrily and then twisted itself sharply in his grip, and before Steve could react, it had bitten down on his left hand, teeth digging in so deep he felt them against his bones.

He couldn't help but scream.

The scream broke his paralysis, and he was finally able fling the wolf's head away from himself as he jolted clumsily to his feet, knocking his chair over backwards. The party of people resurfaced in his vision, and everyone there was staring at him with mixed looks of

incomprehension and fear.

"What the fuck Harrington?"

It was Billy's voice that tore Steve out of his tunnel-vision, and as he turned towards him, holding his bitten hand helplessly in his good one, he began stammering.

"It- it fuckin'- it fucking *bit* me!" he yelped, unable to keep his entire body from shaking.

Billy looked equal parts confused and furious, and when Steve pointed a trembling finger at where he'd thrown the wolf's head, no one, not even Steve, saw anything more than a pipe full of wasted drugs. Horrified, Steve frantically looked around for where the head had gone and nearly screamed again when he felt someone's hand touch his shoulder.

"Chill out man, nothing bit you."

The stranger pried his injured hand away from where he'd been holding it clutched to his stomach, and when Steve finally looked, he saw that his hand was unharmed. He held it up and stared at it in bewildered disbelief, twisting it around to inspect every angle.

There were no bite marks to be found.

"I-" Steve stuttered, brow contorting as he tried to process what the fuck had just happened. "But- It was a *wolf*-"

"Alright man, sure, whatever you say."

"It *was*! None of you saw it?!"

"Just chill out, man, sit down, you're harshing the vibe-"

"Fuck the vibe!" he shouted, throwing back his head to bellow out a loud laugh. He was hysterical, Billy saw. Hysterical and out of his fucking mind.

It took a good five minutes before anyone could get him to calm down enough to right his chair and sit back down. Whoever owned

the pipe had gone and collected it, staring at Steve warily as he chewed off every single one of his fingernails, his legs bobbing up and down wildly. A dark look had overtaken him, and his eyes kept darting around the fire, not looking at anyone in particular but *behind* them, tracking the lurching, jittery motions the shadows made around them.

There was something out there, he was sure of it.

3. Trouble Comes Knocking

Home and tucked into his bed with no memory of how he got there, Steve dreamt of queer things he didn't understand. Blurry, dark images swarmed his subconscious like a great, malevolent storm bearing down on him too quickly for him to escape. His dreams had him running through the woods, avoiding the shadowed areas between the trees where huge, narrow maws erupted from the blackness, showing off fangs that were long and drawn into needle points, eager to draw blood.

The dreams plagued him for a week, replacing the threat that came with the usual monsters he'd come to be familiar with in his sleep. He'd faced the things with teeth-lined flower bulbs for heads and survived, but now whatever it was that was hunting him down in his thoughts was unknown, and the fear of that unknown was what woke him up every night that week, leaving him a trembling, sweat-soaked wreck who couldn't comprehend the level of terror he was feeling.

There was, at least, some sort of reprieve from the torment his psyche was undergoing. On the days he went to school, Billy avoided him vehemently, not even trying to go out of his way to talk shit or start a fight. In fact, it seemed that he was actually going out of his way to *avoid* him now.

Whatever had happened at the party had turned him off from Steve Harrington for the time being, and for that at least Steve was thankful. Something good had come from that miserable night, and if he were lucky, maybe it would last a lifetime. Billy probably assumed he was crazy (and wasn't *that* the prime example of the pot calling the kettle black?) after witnessing his episode, and maybe he was, but every time he thought about it his hand began to throb painfully, as though it really had been injured. There were still no marks, though; not a single indicator of any kind that his hand had been harmed in any way.

It made no sense, and he didn't know what to do about that.

Who did he have to talk to that would believe him if he opened up about what he'd seen that night by the fire? Or of the thing that he'd

seen skulking about in the woods like some sort of horrible, jittering animatronic that someone had let loose to terrorize him? Would anyone even believe him if he *did* say anything? Billy certainly hadn't, and he'd been a first-hand witness.

He groaned into his hands, letting his head fall forward onto the steering wheel of his car where he sat in the parking lot, too lethargic to leave the school yet. Those stupid weekend parties were supposed to have been an escape, but now he found that they had become the primary source of his stress.

Earlier in the day, Steve had found another one of those mysterious notes slipped into his locker. On it was another map and address, and he'd had half a mind to rip it up then and there before he'd flipped it over out of bitter curiosity.

There, instead of the '+0' that had usually been marked on the card, was a '+1' instead. The change was the only reason he hadn't torn it to pieces.

"What is happening to me," he whined, dragging his fingers down his face, pulling at the baggy, discoloured skin beneath his eyes. "What the hell does any of this *mean*?!" he cried out to no one.

He'd have to track down whoever it was that was leaving the invitations in his locker to get any kind of information. *Someone* from school was leaving them for him, even if that person wasn't showing up at the parties, which raised the question of 'why' again. Why wasn't whoever was inviting him going? Why was it just Billy and Steve that were invited, and no one else from their school? Why, why, why?

There were no answers, and no way for him to get any.

Groaning with frustration, he sat up straight in his seat, letting his hands fall away from his face. He stared out of the windshield with a blank expression on his face when he caught sight of Billy walking towards his Camaro across the parking lot. Looking at him made him frown.

Maybe... what if it was *Billy* leaving him the notes? Could all this shit

be some sort of elaborate long-term prank he'd concocted just to fuck with Steve on a psychological level?

As if Billy could sense that Steve was thinking about him, he paused mid-stride and turned to face him. They made eye contact briefly, and in that moment Steve knew Billy couldn't possibly be behind it all. It was far too elaborate for someone as brash as he was, and his reaction upon seeing Steve freak out hadn't been one of victory, but was rather one of apprehension. If Billy had been the mastermind behind it all, he would have gotten what he'd wanted and celebrated that, but he hadn't. It was beyond Steve and Billy both; the other boy had just been coming along for the free drinks.

Caught up in his thoughts, Steve hadn't realized Billy was walking towards him until he knocked on the window, rapping his knuckles sharply against the glass.

He jumped in his seat at the noise, turning his wide, brown eyes up to Billy who had a deep frown locked on his face. Pointing with his finger, he gestured for Steve to roll down the window.

"What do you want?" Steve asked as he cracked the window, doing his best to sound annoyed despite how tired he felt.

"What do you think?" Billy retorted smartly, rolling his eyes. He glanced around the parking lot to see if anyone was looking their way before he leaned down low, resting an arm along the frame of Steve's car to speak quietly. "I didn't get another invite, did you?"

"You didn't?"

The surprise Steve felt must have been blatantly plastered across his face, for Billy's lips twitched into a grimace when he spoke.

"No."

Steve sat still for a moment, studying the passive look of muted anger on Billy's face before he thought he ought to show him the note. He pulled his school bag that had been in his passenger seat over into his lap and began digging through it, looking for the invitation. His fingers brushed past his notebooks, pens, and other loose items

before they finally felt the stiff cardstock the note had been made of.

As he pulled it out, Billy's frown deepened.

"Why the fuck did you get reinvited?" Scowling fiercely, he stood up and took out his pack of cigarettes, placing one between his snarling teeth. "I bet it was that faggot on the guitar. Told whoever's running that shit show not to bring me back."

"Whoa, language, man," Steve said disapprovingly.

Billy narrowed his eyes as he lit his cigarette, running his tongue along his teeth before leaning back down. "Let me see it."

Something about the borderline manic look that Billy held in his eye made Steve hesitate, fingering the card in his hands uncertainly. He wanted to roll up the window and keep the invitation to himself, even if he had no interest in attending, and he definitely didn't want *Billy* going in his stead.

All the same, he gave the card over when Billy reached in for it.

A dark look overtook Billy's face as he studied the card, mouth moving as he silently read and memorized the address. Steve watched him quietly as Billy flipped it over, and saw the look of confusion that spread into his eyes when he saw what was printed there.

"The fuck is this?" he asked, holding up the back of the card that read '+ 1' so that Steve could see it.

"I don't know," Steve replied honestly. "All the others I got had '+ 0' on the back."

Billy flipped the invitation back around so he could read it again. A look of concentration overtook the anger that he usually held there briefly as he contemplated its meaning.

"It kinda looks like the shit Susan sent out when she married my dad; mailed out their wedding invitations with how many guests the person invited could bring," he explained, turning the card over in his hands contemplatively. "Like, y'know, their plus one or something."

"Huh." Steve hummed, realizing that that actually made some sense. It was kind of obvious, now that he thought about it.

"Congratulations Harrington, you get the honor of taking me to the party with you," Billy said then, flicking the card back at him through the opening in the window.

"So, what, you're like my date now?" Steve snorted, chuckling a bit, amused at the notion. He grabbed the card from where it had settled on his dashboard. "Why *Billy*, if you wanted me to take you out, all you had to do was ask."

The fear he'd felt throughout the week in his dreams was trying to resurface in his stomach at the thought of attending another one of the forest gatherings, despite how nonchalant he was acting. He swallowed it back and tried to ignore it as it crept its way throughout his body, circulating through his bloodstream in a steady, repeating current.

Billy sneered at him as he spoke. "Yeah, I bet you would like that, wouldn't you, Harrington?"

"Well, tough, because I'm not going," Steve said, dropping the humor in his voice and averting his gaze. He shoved the card back into the deep dredges of his book bag and slung it back into the passenger seat forcefully, as though it were prone to attacking him.

"What, you have one bad trip and that's it? You're done?" Billy scoffed and put a hand on his hip, staring down at him with a taunting grin. He blew out a stream of smoke that mixed in with the wind and blew away almost instantly. "Thought 'King Steve' was supposed to have been a real party animal; not the one and done kinda guy."

"But these aren't normal parties!" he blurted out, banging his fists into the steering wheel in frustration. He barely missed hitting the horn. "There's something *wrong* about them!"

"The only thing wrong about them was how you freaked out over nothing," Billy drawled, looking around the parking lot again to make sure no one was paying attention to them as Steve raised his voice.

For some reason, the fact that Billy was concerned about who might have been watching them pissed Steve off. "Whatever you *think* attacked you was all in that fucked up, pretty little head of yours."

Steve groaned and let his head fall back against the headrest of his seat. There he let it roll towards Billy so he could fix him with an even glare. "There is something bigger going on out there. How else would you explain all the secrecy ? Nobody else knows anything about them."

A group of girls walked by them, greeting Billy energetically as they passed. He turned away briefly to entertain them with a smile, and when he redirected his attention back to Steve he found that he had turned away to stare angrily out his windshield. He looked tired, with deep, purple bags drooping under his eyes. Whether Billy believed him or not, it was obvious that whatever Steve thought he'd seen at the party last week was affecting him terribly.

"Fine, say there is something weird going on at those shitty little hick cult parties," Billy relented, recapturing Steve's attention. "Only one way to be sure of that, Princess, and I think you know what that means."

Steve moaned and shut his eyes. "Why are you so desperate to go? Do you seriously have nothing better to do? Something a little more your speed, maybe?"

Billy didn't answer him; merely stared him down with a hard, steely gaze that made Steve sigh and look away.

"Alright, *fine* . If it'll prove that something shady's going on out there, then fuck it, fine," Steve said, gesturing about with his hands as he spoke. "I'll take you out if that's what you want, Hargrove, since you seem *so desperate* to go."

"Great." Billy's face lost its hardness as he broke out into a grin and slapped his hand down onto the roof of the BMW loudly, ignoring the implication behind Steve's words. "Don't be late, Harrington, and get some sleep; lookin' a little rough around the edges there, pretty boy."

He walked away before Steve could say anything else, hips swaying

as he made his way over to his Camaro where his sister was waiting for him.

It was snowing freely on the night of the party, coming down in a mild torrent that likely would have closed the roads had they not already been salted in advance. He drove slowly on the backroads, navigating through streets he'd never been to before in a part of town that looked largely uninhabited. The few houses that he saw didn't have any lights on, and the road was, for the most part, as dark as the forests he'd been dreaming of. The natural light from the full moon coupled with his headlights were all he had to work with as he rode on.

His windshield wipers thunked back and forth rapidly, deflecting the falling snow faster than it could settle. He made sure to keep the BMW traveling well under the speed limit, keeping a careful eye on the road as he traveled. In the back of his mind, he wondered if Billy had ever driven in the snow before. There was no way in hell he'd make it if he drove the way he usually did.

Maybe that would be for the best, though, Steve thought. No more Billy, no more parties, no more problems.

A strong gust of wind blew past, rattling his car. The BMW swerved a bit before he strengthened his grip over the wheel, righting his car in its lane. The back country roads had been salted this time at least as opposed to the last time he'd ridden them, but they were still slick enough that one wrong move could have him sliding off if he wasn't careful. He dropped his speed a little bit more and was driving past a cow pasture when he first smelled something strange.

Initially, he wrote it off as some byproduct of cold cow shit, but as he sniffed the air creeping in through his air vents, he realized he hadn't smelled anything quite like it before. It was entirely unpleasant, and reminded him of the time his mother had gotten sick with the flu and his dad had made him care for her. The stuffiness of her bedroom that she'd been holed up in for a few days coupled with her illness had been staggering, and was similar to what he was smelling now.

Coming in with the warm air, it smelled of stale beer and sickness; a

combination that had him wrinkling his nose in disgust. He sped back up, trying to get through whatever fetid cow pasture he'd been driving by as quickly as he could possibly manage in an effort to escape it.

As he rounded a curve the smell dissipated somewhat, easing the slight bout of nausea it had caused when he'd initially smelled it. He relaxed his shoulders, unaware that they'd been tensed at all when the reek came back in a strong, sudden wave.

Steve gagged and almost swerved off the road, holding one of his arms up to breath through the sleeves of his shirt. It smelled so strong of sickness and rot that Steve thought the whole field of cows must have died or something. It was revolting, and he almost began dry heaving as the road curved and he came across something lying in the road.

A large, black shape was lying horizontally across the pavement, blocking nearly both lanes of traffic. He hadn't been going fast enough to hit it, but he'd come close to doing so as he slowed the car to a stop, confusion furrowing his brow as he stared at the blockage. The falling snow made it difficult to see what it was clearly, but it looked too thin for it to have been a fallen tree.

It almost laid flat against the road, and if it hadn't been for the light dusting of snow coating it, illustrating it as a 3D object, Steve would have been certain that it was a shadow.

A shadow like in his dreams.

Panic built up within him as quickly as a balloon filled with water, and threatened to burst just as immediately. He sat there with his headlights trained on the shape, breathing heavily out of his mouth when the sudden urge to bolt out of his car and run away overtook him. The last time he'd been *this scared* had been when he'd first encountered the Demogorgon, and for whatever reason as he sat there trembling, he was reminded of how it had almost killed the three of them when it burst into their world.

One hand was on his seatbelt, fumbling to get it undone before he could even think about what he was doing, the other on the door

handle, ready to rip it open when he was freed of his restraint. He wanted to get to the bat in his trunk more than anything else in that moment.

His eyes never left whatever was lying there in front of him, and the longer he stared at it he realized it was a beast of some sort; too large to be a dog, but still canine-like in form. About the size of the Demogorgon, honestly, but *bigger*. It could have been a bear, if not for the weird proportions of its limbs.

Steve finally got the seatbelt undone and was about to run from the car when he finally caught himself in a moment of clarity.

'What the hell are you doing, Harrington?' Surprisingly, his voice of reason came in the form of Billy. It was unexpected, but for some reason Steve found it grounding to hear Billy's stern voice rumble over the panicked thoughts currently running rampant in his head. *'Gonna just ditch your rich bitch car and run out into the freezing woods like some sort of moron? Get real.'*

"Get real," he repeated, calming down a bit. He placed his hands back on the steering wheel and stared at the thing lying in the road, wondering if there was enough space for him to drive around it without getting stuck in the snow. It wasn't moving, after all; maybe it had been hit by a car and was dead.

While it blocked the entirety of the road on his side, it only spread out about halfway into the lane of oncoming traffic. If his tires didn't get stuck in the snow lining the shoulder, he should be able to get around it without issue. His panic, though subdued now, still threatened to become unmanageable as he put his foot gingerly on the gas, easing his car forward slowly and turning to navigate around whatever the hell was just lying there.

His heart was beating so loudly he could hear it thundering in his ears as he inched the car forward, snow piling down in a hard flurry around him. He was having a hard time breathing as he got closer and closer, his car now entirely in the left lane and almost even with the creature when it spasmed. Steve felt his heart seize up as the shadowy beast jerked spasmodically, raising its head so that it was staring in at him through the passenger window.

He heard himself start to whine, a high-pitched, desperate noise of terror as he stared back into the beast's beady red eyes and he was sure, so, so sure that it was going to kill him if he didn't move. He slammed on the gas as it lurched again, trying to come to a stand as Steve's tires squealed uselessly on the slick pavement and the snowy ground before they finally caught traction and shot him forward.

The smell alone had been enough to make him sick, but his stomach began convulsing when he looked dead into the thing's eyes. He almost threw up into his lap as he drove away, not daring to look back at what he'd seen to see if it was following him. He couldn't control the way his whole body was shaking when he realized that he'd seen those eyes before.

The monster in the road had been the very same thing he'd seen that first night in the woods two weeks ago, and he knew now without a doubt that it was following him. That, or the parties were leading *him* to *it*, and he didn't like the implications either way.

4. Fear and Loathing in Hawkins, IN

The only thing that kept Steve from speeding through the snow-laden roads as badly as he wanted to was the fear that he would take a turn too fast and wind up wrapping his car around a tree. He forced himself to take it slow, even as his whole body shook with fearful tremors, the panic inside him begging him to go faster to escape what he'd seen.

But what *had* he seen, exactly?

Some kind of rabid bear, perhaps; it's eyes lit up red by his car lights somehow. It wasn't a Demo-Dog, or the Demogorgon, or a Demo anything; it was just some strange spawn of Hawkins that wouldn't leave him alone. The idea that it was hunting him in some regard was ridiculous, but when he'd looked into its eyes, meeting its unearthly gaze, he'd suddenly been sure that that was exactly what it was doing.

His hand that had been bitten by the wolf's head throbbed painfully, eliciting a sharp intake of breath from him as he took it off the wheel and held it to his stomach. It had marked him that night by the fire, but as to why it had chosen him, he couldn't say. Nor did he want to know; all he wanted was for it to leave him the hell alone.

Steve tapped on his brakes as he rounded a curve and almost swerved when he saw his headlights pick up a flash of red in front of him. His pulse jumped, a muscle in his neck spasming before he realized that he'd just come up on the line of cars that were parked on the side of the road by the woods.

"Keep it together, Harrington," he mumbled quietly to himself, advancing slowly on the parked cars, their taillights lighting up briefly as he passed.

As he decelerated, part of him wanted to keep going, just to keep driving and leave Indiana entirely, but he knew that was irrational; where would he go? Why was running away an option he was even considering? He'd fought plenty of monsters before in the past, so what made this one so utterly terrifying that he was actually

considering skipping town to get away from it?

'Because it wants you,' he thought. 'It wants you.'

Realizing he was on the brink of having a panic attack, Steve forced himself to take deep breaths as he coasted to the front of the line, parking in front of an old Volvo when he reached the end. He shifted the transmission into park and immediately slumped forward in his seat, body still trembling slightly as he rested his forehead against the steering wheel. He counted to ten, to fifteen, to twenty and so on until the shaking finally subsided and he felt ready enough to deal with his situation. Gathering what remained of his nerve, he sat up straight in his seat and glanced at his rearview mirror to see-

Nothing.

The road was clear and empty behind him, and if he'd thought that the creature was following him, it wasn't there. The natural lighting from the moon illuminated the roadway, tinting the snowdrifts a gloomy blue colour as the snow continued to fall gently. What would have been an otherwise peaceful night was tainted with the knowledge that the wolfbearing was still out there, coming for him.

His panic temporarily abated, he ran a hand through his hair and looked around, noticing Billy's Camaro parked on the other side of the road. The headlights were off, but Steve could hear the engine idling, a low, steady rumble emitting from under the hood. His windows weren't tinted, and with the aid of the moonlight Steve saw that Billy was sitting in the driver's seat, head turned in his direction. Swallowing thickly, Steve checked his mirrors again before cutting his engine and stepping out into the cold.

Shivering in spite of being bundled into his thickest winter coat, he hesitated and cast another look back the way he had come. There was still nothing, but he had a hard time believing that there truly wasn't anything lurking in the long, dark line of trees that lined the road like foreboding sentinels. He crossed his arms across his chest after he shut the door and debated on whether or not he should grab his bat, shifting his weight from foot to foot in the snow.

With no intention now of actually staying for the party, he decided

against it and crossed the road. He was just going to tell Billy he wasn't staying, warn him that something monstrous and disturbing was living in the woods, and then get the fuck out of there before it came after him, party be damned. The muscles in his legs felt weak, and were hardly able to keep him upright as he stumbled to Billy's door, knocking on the window and looking back down the road to make sure it was still clear.

The window rolled down slowly and stopped about halfway down. Smoke slipped through the crack, and it was then Steve realized Billy had been hotboxing a joint while he waited. When he turned to address him, Billy's eyes were hazy and bloodshot and seemed to have trouble focusing on where Steve was standing. He kept blinking a lot, obviously stoned.

"You're late," Billy said, his tone of voice even despite his annoyance. His eyelashes fluttered, struggling with the effort to stay open. "I told you not to be."

"We have to leave," Steve said, not quite realizing how frantic he sounded. His voice cracked as his words and thoughts clashed and struggled to come out all at once, climbing over themselves in an effort to be spoken. "The thing- it was on the road- it's going to *come here*."

"Oh my God, not this shit again," Billy groaned, letting his head fall back against the headrest with a sigh of frustration. "Look, Princess, we've been *over* this-"

"Yeah, well, circumstances have changed," Steve insisted, but Billy didn't seem to be convinced. He bit his lip and glanced over his shoulder hurriedly before leaning down so he was eye level with him, boring his eyes deeply into Billy's. "I didn't just *imagine* it, okay? There was something in the road on the way here, I thought it was dead, but it got up and I think it's following me. I think it's *been* following me."

Billy studied Steve's face through his heavy eyelids, an expression of boredom playing out around the edges of his otherwise stoic face.

"So?" he finally said after a moment, breaking their eye contact to

puff on his joint, blowing the sour smoke into Steve's face when he exhaled. "You're paranoid, Harrington."

"Fuck you, I'm not-!" Steve huffed angrily and stood up, running another hand through his hair as he stared at Billy in frustration. Talking to Billy was like talking to a brick wall, dense and impenetrable. "I'm not *paranoid*," he hissed. "I know what I saw was real."

"Alright, so say you *did* see something," Billy said, sitting up straight in his seat and fixing Steve with an even look. He used his joint to point at him for emphasis. "And let's say that it *is* following you, you think it's just gonna stop if you take off? You go home and, what, it magically loses your trail? You don't think it'd just wind up followin' you back like some kinda dog that got lost cross-country?"

Steve balked.

"I-"

Billy took the last hit of his joint before he dropped it into the snow by Steve's feet, chuckling at the look on his face. "Safety in numbers, Harrington; if this 'monster' you *think* is really tracking you down, then doesn't it stand to reason that you'd be better off going to where people are gonna be?"

Steve's jaw worked soundlessly as he stared, gape-mouthed, uncomprehending of the fact that Billy could think rationally, especially when he was under the influence. Billy seemed humoured by this and chuckled deeply, flicking his hair back over his shoulder.

"You just want to go to the party," Steve accused, finally able to find his voice. Through and despite everything, it all boiled back down to the parties. Those damned, miserable parties.

"Sure I do," Billy said, lips spreading wide apart in a jovial smile. He reached over to the center console and flicked his finger over the switch to roll his window up, staring at Steve through the glass with that cheesy smile plastered on his face all the while. Once it finished sliding into place, Billy cut the engine and popped open his door, using it to force Steve to take a step back as he exited the car. "So if

we're done jerking each other off here..."

He trailed off, gesturing to the woods with his hand.

Steve licked his lips nervously, eyes flitting from Billy to the woods and back before finally looking over his shoulder, glancing back at his car and the open road.

That dreadful feeling he'd gotten from seeing the creature earlier was still with him, looming over him in the guise of a thinly veiled warning. Going into the woods would be surrendering to it in some regard, but what Billy said did have some truth to it. What if it *did* follow him home, what then? Better to confront it with a group of people who would potentially have his back than to lure it to the only safe place he still had left. After all, it had taken three of them to attempt to defeat the Demogorgon, and even then it had escaped. Steve hated to admit it, but Billy was right when he said there was safety in numbers; but was blindly walking into its territory really the best course of action to reach that point of safety?

"Shit or get off the pot, Harrington."

Billy was watching him closely, watery blue eyes unclear and still hazy. A new emotion crept in with the sense of foreboding Steve had been harboring, and he was dismayed to identify it as resignation. A confrontation was coming, regardless of whether he led it home or approached it on his own.

"Let me get my flashlight," he muttered, ignoring the look of victory that briefly flashed across Billy's face. He couldn't possibly know what he was getting himself into, Steve thought as he backtracked to his car. If he did, he wouldn't have been so self-satisfied. His feet threatened to give out in the snow as he opened the door, slipping half his body into the front seat to grab the flashlight that he'd left in the passenger seat.

Holding it in his hand, he clicked it on and off before standing up and making his way to the trunk, where he popped it open and stood staring down at the bat. He hesitated before taking it, looking over to where Billy was still standing by his Camaro, hands in his coat pockets and facing the woods. He wanted the comfort that came with

the safety it assured him more than anything else, regardless of whatever people might think of him when they saw him with it. His fingers stroked the wood of the handle confidently before wrapping around it and withdrawing it from the trunk like a warrior unsheathing a blade.

When he closed the trunk and turned back towards Billy, letting the bat swing loosely in his hand before him, Steve clocked the look of surprise on his face and said: "If we're doing this, then we're doing it on my terms."

Billy stared at it expressionless for a moment before busting out into a wolfish grin. "And everyone says *I'm* crazy. Get a load of monster hunter Steve over here."

"Yeah well, if we're lucky I won't have to use it, and if we aren't then you'll be damned glad I brought it," Steve said, ignoring the taunt as he came to a stand still by the forest's edge, staring into the deep gloom.

"Ho-lee shit, you really think there's something out there," Billy said, huffing out a short laugh. The drugged haze he'd been under was replaced with a twinkle of excitement that shone in his eye as he stared at the length of wood, counting the nails embedded in its head. "You're crazy, Harrington; absolutely batshit."

Steve decided not to grace him with a response. Instead, he propped the bat up onto his shoulder and shined his flashlight into the woods, creating a tunnel of sparse lighting in the darkness. He stared into it sullenly, resigned to his fate. His foot sank deeply into the snow as he stepped forward to venture off into the woods.

Up until they heard they howl, Steve had begun to think that maybe things were gonna work out alright. They didn't encounter anything spooky or unusual as they progressed, easing some of the apprehension that had been building up in Steve's psyche. They were going to make it to the bonfire, maybe try to convince some of the people who were there that something malevolent was coming, and then-

And then what, exactly? Rally together and fight it off in one grand, final stand?

Steve scoffed to himself and frowned. Truth be told, he had no idea what was going to happen or how the rest of the night was going to play out. It didn't help that Billy didn't believe him and thought he was suffering from some sort of mental breakdown. He kept smiling at Steve funny, looking over his shoulder when he took the lead to flash him unsettling smirks that were wide and full of teeth. Perturbed by Billy's odd behaviour, his unease about traveling with him commingled with the dread that was still wallowing in his stomach, incubating like a bad virus that would eventually make him sick.

They didn't speak as they walked, the silence of the forest being oppressive enough to subdue any words they thought to share. Navigating through the tall, spindly trees, Steve would occasionally flick his flashlight to the side, illuminating random patches of shadow he thought looked suspicious, but nothing besides the two of them were moving; nothing but the sounds of their feet trudging through the snow reached them. All was still and quiet in a tranquil sort of way, but even so, Steve couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched as they traversed through the underbrush. He didn't trust that the dark spaces between the trees weren't harboring something vicious, but couldn't turn up any evidence to support his that feeling.

All the same, he found himself unable to resist looking over his shoulder every once in a while, convinced he would see something lurking there behind him.

The party was hidden deep in the woods again, far enough away from the road that Steve's feet were becoming uncomfortably cold and Billy had begun to visibly shiver. The shirt he usually kept half undone was now buttoned up and zipped away entirely behind the thick folds of his leather jacket, a site Steve was unused to seeing.

"Feeling a little chilly, Billy?" he couldn't help but say, laughing under his breath at the rhyme despite their situation.

"If you ever say those words to me in that order again, Harrington, I

will kill you," Billy growled, looking back at him threateningly. Despite the severity of his words, Steve thought he could sense a trace of humor in his tone.

They'd been walking steadily for a solid fifteen minutes, neither one of them having caught on to any of the usual visual or audial cues that had alerted them to the bonfire's location in the past. Steve let the light shine low on the ground, looking for tracks they could follow as they trudged along. They hadn't had much luck in that regard, though; all around them was undisturbed snow, blanketing the ground and making it look much softer than it was. He sniffed hard, his nose beginning to run from the exposure to the cold and frowned when he caught the faint whiff of something that smelled... familiar, but off. He'd smelled it somewhere before he was sure, but couldn't quite place it because of how faint it was.

In front of him, Billy stopped walking, taking him out of his thoughts.

"See something?" Steve asked, hating how hopeful he sounded as he stepped up beside him to peer into the darkness where Billy was looking.

At first he didn't see what had caught Billy's attention, and was confused at the sudden way he'd halted their advance. Then his flashlight swept over the disembodied arm lying outstretched behind a tree trunk, and Steve's blood instantly ran cold.

"Oh, oh shit," he stuttered, taking a reflexive step backwards.

There were dark splatters of blood all around the seperated limb, still clothed in the arm of the coat the victim had been wearing when they'd been maimed. The clothing was tattered and ripped away in sections, exposing deep, fearsome gashes where the skin had been torn away. The hand was fixed in a clawed position, reaching for the canopy of trees desperately.

"What the fuck," he heard Billy whisper, and that was when they heard it.

A high-pitched, keening whine tore through the silence, ululating wildly as it formed into an elongated howl. It warbled unsteadily in

the darkness, seeming to come from all around them. The sound of it rendered them immobile, freezing them where they stood.

"What the fuck," Billy repeated, turning his head around to try and place where the howl was coming from. His tongue was swerving rapidly along his lower lip, his fight or flight sense close to triggering.

All the 'told-you-so's that Steve had been collecting mentally dissipated the instant the shrieking howl tapered off, leaving behind a haunting echo that rang through the trees. Steve suddenly realized that the scent he'd smelled was the same from when he'd come upon the creature in the road, and with budding horror he noticed that it was growing stronger.

"It's coming!" he said, his rapid breaths forming puffs of crystals in the air before him.

"What the hell kind of man-eating wolves do you hicks have out here?!" Billy shouted, turning on Steve as though he had been the one to set the creature loose. His eyes held anger in them; anger and a dash of fear. "What the fuck is going on?!"

"I don't know!" Steve snapped in return, gripping the bat tightly in his hand. He didn't appreciate the way accusatory manner in which Billy was targeting him when they should have been getting ready to fight together.

Another howl erupted from the darkness. It was louder than the first, closer, but as it warbled to its end it became shrill, ending in a shriek that sounded almost human. It chilled him to the bone, raising the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck. He held the bat in one hand, but couldn't grip it as firmly as he would have liked with the flashlight in his offhand.

"Take this," he said, holding out the flashlight towards Bill urgently. "Take it!"

He was placing a lot of faith in Billy to not run away with the light, he knew. He knew, but he did so anyway, thrusting it towards him despite the bad blood that ran between them. Their chances of survival were better if they stuck together, and even though Billy was

a hardass, that didn't make him stupid. Billy furrowed his brow, understanding what he was being entrusted with as he took it. The howl when it came again was practically right on top of them, and this time they could hear something racing toward them in the darkness, bringing with it that terrible smell of pestilence.

Steve's heart was hammering in his chest, working overtime as Billy scanned the darkness with the light, illuminating their surroundings with a steady grip. They stepped closer towards one another and waited, listening intently as the thing circled them relentlessly. They could hear its panting breaths as it ran around them, footfalls tearing at the snow on the ground. A sound like claws scrabbling across the bark of the nearby trees drew their attention to the left, and then suddenly the sounds stopped

Billy jerked the flashlight around in the direction they'd heard the noises, looking for where it was hidden in the dark spaces the moonlight couldn't reach. The branches of the trees there swayed as though they'd recently been disturbed, but there was no other sign of where it had gone or currently was. Steve turned with him, arms tensing, ready to swing.

"Do you see it?" he asked, speaking in a hushed voice as though the creature didn't already know where they were- as if it hadn't just been circling them like a shark in open waters.

"Shut up," Billy replied curtly. He was alert in a way Steve had never seen before, eyes sharp and focused as he took on a defensive stance, ready to fight.

A brief chittering sort of noise that came from above them was all the warning they got before the beast descended, falling directly from the branches overhead. It landed between them in a heap, scrambling along the ground uselessly before it drew up to its full height to howl loudly again.

Steve couldn't move, his eyes glued to the horror of long limbs and bare, pale skin before him. It stood far taller than he or Billy or any man Steve knew, and rabid it might be, but a bear it was not.

Its arms hung disproportionately long at its side, ending in sharp

claws that were longer than the boney fingers they sprouted from. No fur graced its thin body save for around its head, which was lupine-like in form and harbored those deep set, glowing red eyes that were now fixed on him. It peeled its lips back, exposing the long, narrow teeth that had haunted Steve in his dreams and lunged.

Steve managed to remember himself in time to move, dodging out of the way as the creature barreled towards him. He was used to facing monsters and was able to snap himself out of the stupor its initial appearance had caused him, but Billy wasn't. He stood there slack-jawed, unable to comprehend what he was seeing as it crashed into him, snapping its maw shut and sinking its teeth deep into the muscle between his neck and shoulder.

"Hargrove!" He heard Steve shout as the thing lifted him in its mouth. Billy let out a shout of surprise at the pain, gasping as it nearly gored him with its teeth. Half-aware of what he was doing, he raised his arms up to try and beat the head into letting him go.

It slammed him hard into the ground in response, dazing him as his body collided against a thick tree branch that snapped under the weight of impact. He felt something inside of him break as the air was forced out of his lungs, arms falling away as the beast pinned him down with its claws. It remained motionless for a moment, a deep growl coming up from its throat before it then began to quickly drag him away, teeth still embedded in his flesh.

The flashlight fell free from his hand, rolling into the snow so that it cast its beam away from the conflict. Shrouded now in darkness, Steve almost lost sight of where the thing was violently dragging Billy along the ground, moving much faster than he could keep up with. He made a dash for the flashlight, fumbling it in his hands before he chased after them, listening for Billy's shouts and vocalizations of pain to know where they'd gone.

"Hargrove!" he shouted, vaulting over deadfall as he pursued them into the dark, the light of the flashlight being thrown around wickedly as he sprinted. Distantly, and farther away than he would have liked, he could hear Billy struggling, screaming in frustration and agony. "Fuck, fuck!" he breathed as he ran.

There was a deep cut groove in the snow from where Billy's body had been pulled along that Steve tried to follow, ignoring the amount of blood that was thrown around on the ground. It spread in ragged tendrils, looking like a gorey Jackson Pollock painting.

His feet were entirely numbed by the cold and the snow that had crept into his sneakers by the time he burst into the clearing where the party had been held. He was momentarily disoriented by the bonfire, burning monstrously bright and flaring taller than he'd seen the other fires do in the past weeks. The clearing was empty, but the roar of the mighty fire was almost deafening. A weird, disconcerting energy was gathered there, thrumming in the air so potently he could feel the vibrations in his teeth.

The stink was strongest here, overwhelming him briefly as he scanned the clearing.

The thing that had Billy, gripped firmly in its mouth by his arm now, was on the other side of the fire. Billy was struggling viciously, kicking and punching and trying to dig his fingers into its eyes in an effort to get it to release him. His fingers never could quite get near its eyes, though, and as Steve watched, the beast began to thrash its head back and forth, whipping Billy side to side like a ragdoll.

Billy's scream was enough to spur Steve into action.

He dropped the flashlight and ran forward, winding his arms back to swing the bat hard into the creature's back. It released Billy with a throaty wheeze of pain, taken off guard by Steve's surprise attack. The nails of the bat stuck in its skin, making it hard for Steve to pull back and swing again. Before it turned on him, he wound back and swung harder, this time aiming for its ribcage.

The bat connected with an audible thud, smacking into its ribs hard enough to break a few. The beast howled loudly in anger and turned to slash at him, claws raking across Steve's vulnerable arm and tearing through both the cloth of his coat and his skin with ease. The pain was bright and agonizing, spreading up the length of his arm like a bolt of lightning to his shoulder. He gasped but held firm to the bat, swinging back to aim at its face this time as it tried to strike him again.

He nailed it in the jaw, using what remained of his energy before his injured arm gave out. The beast's jaw swung to the side at a grotesque angle, unhinging as the bones cracked and broke. The beast stood there stupidly for a moment, trying to clack its broken jaw back into place, but try as it might, it could not get it to shut.

Hunched over with dark, crimson blood trailing out of its wounds, Steve's eyes grew wide when he saw that something was moving beneath the creature's skin. What must have been its bones were slowly moving, re-aligning themselves to heal instantly with a sick crunch and popping noise. It began to whine frantically, arching its back in pain as its jaw swung around uselessly, turning its angry red eyes on Steve.

'I can't beat this,' Steve thought, watching in desperate horror as the punctured, bleeding skin knit itself back together, boiling up before flattening back down as though nothing had harmed it.

He stood there as the strong feeling of defeat dropped into his stomach, but still he raised his bat, fighting against the pain in his arm to lift it above his head. He waited for the creature to make its move, but something about it was wrong; where the bones in its ribs had been able to heal themselves, its mouth still hung useless and open. Blood was spilling out between its teeth in a furious torrent. It tried to howl again, but without the ability to properly form its muzzle all that it managed to produce was an inhuman screech. The beast turned away from him suddenly and fled into the darkness, dropping down on all fours to dash away with its body held close to the forest floor.

Steve stared after it uncomprehendingly, letting the bat drop into the snow in his shock. His blood, warm and plentiful was slipping down his arm and dripping into the snow, pooling where he stood. Then Billy whimpered, and Steve remembered where he was.

The air no longer reeked; the small glen was empty, and the monster had retreated.

In the light of the fire, Billy looked pale when Steve stumbled towards where he lay with his legs outstretched before him. There were tears in his jeans and blood sprayed out all around him from the

thrashing he'd received.

"My arm," Billy moaned, his jaw clenched tight as Steve crouched down beside him. His eyes were shut, and his face was very strained, the tendons in his neck popping out as he swallowed thickly. "Oh fuck, my fucking *arm*."

"What about it?" Steve asked uncertainly, eyes flickering over Billy's injured body rapidly but not daring to look at his arm; he wasn't sure he'd be able to handle it if it turned out Billy had been dismembered.

"Is it- fuck, is it still there?" Billy hissed, opening his eyes at last, wincing up into the night sky.

Steve swallowed hard, licking his lips before he found the courage to look. Relief flooded through him when he saw that it was, but even though his arm was still attached, it wasn't in good shape. It was obviously dislocated; possibly even broken. Deep, bloody gashes seemed to have stripped away sections of his flesh entirely, and in one place Steve thought he could see something white that might have been bone underneath his twitching muscles.

"Y-yeah, yeah, it's still there, holy fuck." Steve stood up, unsure of what to do. He looked around the clearing aimlessly, trying to focus long enough to figure out what the next step to take was. "We gotta get out of here."

"No shit," Billy groaned, beads of sweat building up across his face. With his good arm, he reached over to tentatively clutch his wounded one, blood gushing out over his fingers as he held it tightly.

"Can you stand? Walk?" Steve asked, uncertain of what he was supposed to do in the event Billy couldn't. He was sure that he would either bleed out or die of exposure if he left him to try and get help on his own, but he couldn't think of what else he could do if he couldn't be moved.

"Fuck if I know," Billy said, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"We can't stay here," Steve repeated dumbly, and then stood up to outstretch his arm that hadn't been clawed towards Billy.

For a moment it seemed as though he wasn't going to move. Billy sat there in the snow, a twisted expression of pain stretched tightly across his face as he clutched his arm in self-assurance. Then he released it, grabbing hold of Steve's hand and allowing himself to be pulled unsteadily to his feet.

The blood on his hand made their grip weak, and he almost fell down. He swayed dizzily on his feet, lightheaded from the blood loss as his arm hung limply by his side. Steve hoisted him up and slung his good arm across his shoulders, bearing the majority of Billy's weight on his wounded side. The pain was unlike anything he'd ever felt before, but he knew he would have to endure it in order to get him out of the woods. He slowly began walking them back the way they'd come, following the bloody trail out of the clearing by the light of the full moon, hoping that the creature wouldn't dare to attack them again. Both the flashlight and his bat were left where he'd dropped them as he struggled to uphold their combined weight in the snow.

Behind them, the bonfire continued burning. Distantly, they heard a howl, but they did not see the monster again that night.

5. Last Man on Earth

He'd only been in bed for an hour, and had been asleep for even less when his phone rang. It roused Hopper from his weak slumber with a groan that rumbled out from deep within his chest. The phone on his bedside jangled loudly, the sound of it echoing off the walls and ringing in his ears, wailing like a siren that demanded his attention. He didn't want to answer the call, but the thought that the constant ringing would probably wake up El made him groan again. With a resigned sigh, he reached out to answer the phone, hand fumbling in the darkness to draw it towards him.

"Hopper here," he mumbled into the receiver, voice deep and heavily laden with sleep. He didn't bother trying to mask it.

"Yeah uh, sorry to wake you Jim, but this is Grady down at the hospital, and, well, we got two boys down here that turned up in a real bad way-"

"Grady?" he mumbled, rubbing at his face irritably. He didn't recognize the name; didn't understand why they were on a first name basis. All he could think of was the character from the Shining that had the same name, and it wasn't a good association. "Sure, okay. How bad?"

Half-tucked into his bedspread, Hopper glanced at the display of his clock and sighed deeply. He'd gone to sleep around twelve, and it was a little past one now. Part of him wished he'd just picked up and set down the receiver without answering, or somehow managed to sleep through it- he wasn't even supposed to be on call; let the night shift handle this one. Regardless, he sat up with a grunt and shimmied his legs out of the warmth of his blankets, swinging them over the edge of the bed. Clicking on his desk lamp, he created a small, heatless aura of light around him and bit back a yawn.

"Really, really, really bad," the man from the hospital was saying, emphasizing the word in a different way each time he said it. *"One of them's about to assume room temperature, if you catch my meaning, and the other looks like he shoved his arm straight into a pit of barbed wire. We would've just called whoever was on-duty down at the station, but the conscious one asked for you specifically."*

His eyes had been shut while he listened to Grady speak, on the verge of falling asleep while sitting up, but they opened wide at his words, a chill traveling down his spine that shook his shoulders.

"He asked for me?" he repeated back, speaking slowly. The memory of when he'd gathered all the kids and teenagers together in Joyce's house after the latest incident rose to the forefront of his mind. They'd all been gathered around the unconscious body of the Hargrove kid on the floor, trying to decide what to do with him when he told them all that if they were ever in trouble, or ever needed the police for anything, to ask for him directly and he would come help them. It was one of them down at the hospital now, and had he heard right? One of them was almost dead? He licked his lips, resigned to spending the rest of the night dealing with this as he stood up to get dressed. "Who did? Need a name here, pal."

"Uh, yeah, what's that boy's name again? The one who brought in that other kid?" The guy on the phone became muted and distant as he turned away from the phone to ask someone nearby. Hopper couldn't hear what the other person said. *"Oh, right, yeah, it's the Harrington's boy. Steve Harrington's the one who asked for you."*

Harrington; which one was that? The one with the bat?

The one with the hair, he reminded himself, and yeah, the bat.

"Alright, I'll get down there quick as I can; keep. Them. Alive," Hopper stressed, hanging up after he'd been acknowledged.

He dressed hurriedly after he dropped the receiver back into its cradle, stuffing himself into yesterday's unwashed uniform haphazardly in his rush. He was still tired, but the adrenaline boost he'd gotten from the call was slowly bringing him to a functional state of wakefulness. Leaving the light on in his room, he stepped into the main area of his cabin, boots thudding densely against the wood floors to grab his keys.

Lingering in the small living room, he cast a look back at the closed door of El's room. Unsure if the phone call had woken her, he quietly made his way to her room and peeked into her bedroom to check. She was still asleep and tucked into her bed, and boy, he hoped to

God that it wouldn't turn out to be Mike down there at the hospital. God help anyone who hurt that kid with her around; there'd be no stopping her if he'd been hurt.

He closed the door to her bedroom and then went into the cramped kitchen to write out a note for her in case she woke up while he was out.

'Got called in for work, will be back tonight. NO. MIDNIGHT. SNACKS!'

Satisfied with what he'd written, he stuck it somewhere she'd notice it as he pulled on his thick winter coat and plopped his chief's hat onto his head. He stood before the front door and paused briefly, steeling himself for the cold that was going to assault him before stepping into the night and driving out to the Hawkins general hospital.

By the time Hopper showed up, Steve's arm had been fully stitched and wrapped. It had taken more than fifty stitches to get all three of the vicious gashes on his arm closed, but they'd managed to seal the wounds after an hour of tending to them. The lacerations had been deep and long, and would definitely scar after healing, but he was no longer in the right state of mind to worry about that.

His arm had not stopped throbbing with pain despite the fact that the doctor who'd stitched him up had given him some heavy-duty pain pills to soothe it. The medication he'd taken seemed to do everything *but* relieve the pain, leaving him with an arm that ached and a mind that wouldn't focus. The pills left his brain feeling foggy and disoriented, leaving him with the inability to form coherent thoughts. He lingered like a ghost in the waiting room, his eyes holding a haunted look to them as he struggled to sit still for longer than three minutes at a time.

Jim thought he looked kinda funny sitting there wearing a sweater that had one of the sleeves cut off, but pushed the thought aside; he himself probably looked no better. He knew for a fact he'd missed more than one button as he'd gotten dressed, and even then he hadn't bothered to tuck his shirt in.

He felt like he looked every bit the mess Steve was, with the poor kid

dressed in an expensive sweater that had been ruined by the need to address his arm.

'*Damaged goods*,' his mind supplied for him.

"Hey, kid," he said, hiding a yawn behind his hand as he trundled into the waiting room to approach him.

The haunted look that clouded Steve's eyes lifted when he saw Hopper walk in. He'd been sitting in an aisle seat, and had to move his coat so Hopper could take the seat beside him. The coat, Jim noticed as he sat, was also missing its right arm. He stared at the gauze winding up the boy's arm, trying to ascertain the extent to which he'd been harmed. The wrap started a little lower than his elbow, dipping into his forearm a bit and extended all the way up to his shoulder. No wonder they'd had to cut the sleeves off his clothing to get to it.

He tried not to be quite so stern about it, but he fixed Steve with an even gaze as the boy held the gutted carcass of his coat tightly in his arms.

"What's going on, kid?" Hopper asked. "What happened to you?"

"There was-" Steve started, but looked away, unable to maintain eye contact. His eyes flit around the room, checking to see if anyone in the lobby was close enough to eavesdrop on them. There was only the receptionist at her desk and the nurse who'd been keeping Steve company until Hopper got there, but they were both busy talking to each other. He wasn't sure if that was good enough. "It was a *bear*," Steve stressed, looking Hopper in the eye in a firm and unyielding fashion.

"A bear?" Hopper repeated, frowning. They only had black bears up in Indiana, and even then there hadn't been a bear attack in Hawkins since, well, ever. He understood what Steve was trying to say without outright saying it, but he didn't like the implication that something had possibly been left out when they'd closed the gate and attacked them.

"A *bear*," Steve said again, urgently boring his eyes into Hopper. "It

attacked us in the woods."

"Us who?"

"Billy was with me."

"Billy," Hopper said distantly, trying to pinpoint which of the kids he'd been saddled with protecting was Billy. "Billy... That the kid Max drugged? Her brother?"

"Yeah," Steve said, a slight trace of a smile ghosting his lips. It didn't last long. "We were at a, a, a party in the woods, and it just. It just *got us*."

That deep, haunted look crossed over his face again and stayed there, hollowing out his sunken eyes and making him seem years older than he was. Hopper studied him somberly before sighing, pulling out his pen and a small notebook from one of his deep pockets. Turning to a blank page, he began to take notes.

"Where was this party? Who else was there?" he began asking, writing down the answers as Steve gave them. He interrogated him gently but thoroughly, frowning at some of the responses but diligently recording them regardless. He listened patiently as Steve walked him through the attack, detailing as best he could what happened in his messy shorthand. When he was done talking, twenty minutes had passed. The hour was growing late, and Steve's exhaustion was evident.

"Alright," Hopper said, reviewing everything he'd written before flipping his little notebook shut and tucking it away into the confines of his coat. "You say you two saw an arm out there?"

Steve nodded. "It was in the snow as we were walking to the bonfire."

"Christ, what a mess," Hopper mumbled, shutting his eyes momentarily to rub at his forehead, nudging his hat back across his head. "But you never saw a body?"

"No, just a lot of blood."

"Alright." He righted his hat and stood up, looking around the lobby

to where the nurse and receptionist were still chatting, occasionally throwing glances their way as they spoke. "I'm gonna go see the other kid and talk to the doctor, then I'll see about getting you home."

Steve had also come to a stand, but sat back down at his insistence. He watched Hopper leave, that dissociated, empty look overtaking him again as he left to speak with the nurse. As he was being led away, Hopper looked over his shoulder back at the Harrington kid, who sat with a faraway look in his eyes, still holding his coat close.

"Get that kid something warm to drink," Hopper said, addressing the receptionist who nodded obediently, already rising to complete the task. Then the nurse led him away.

"We've stabilized him as well as we can; his Brachial artery was cut and he'd bled out a great deal by the time he got to us. We managed to set his arm- broken in three places, mind- and stanch the blood flow, but his wounds beyond that are *tremendous*."

Standing in the hallway outside the room Billy was being kept in, the doctor- something Roberts- who'd worked on him was shaking his head somberly. Hopper had his notebook back out and was writing down the statement.

"How so?" he asked when the doctor didn't immediately elaborate.

"Well, besides almost dying from the blood loss alone, his arm was practically bitten off at the shoulder, Hop," the doctor said. "The other boy who brought him in said it was a bear, but the size and shape of the teeth we extracted from the wound are all wrong to be a bear."

"There were teeth?" Hopper looked up from his notebook, more interested in this fact than anything else the short man had told him thus far.

The doctor nodded, a weird look of enthusiasm gracing his features. "They're *huge*. Much too big to be from a bear around here."

"Where are they?" Hopper asked, wondering if he'd be able to

recognize them if they turned out to be from some Upside Down creature.

"In my office; are you going to take them as evidence?"

"Probably." Hopper folded his notebook shut and slid it into his pocket. "Can I see the kid?"

He nodded his head at the closed door of the room Billy was in. The doctor agreed, and opened the door for them to step in.

Billy was unconscious, hooked up to a heart monitor machine that was beeping steadily. Several other tubes providing fluids and a blood infusion were stuck in his good arm- the right arm- while his left was stuck in a splint and wrapped up with gauze that was splotchy and red with blood. The strong, medicinal scent that played a big part in Hopper's general dislike of hospitals was heavy in the air as he stepped in and stood beside the bed.

He looked down at him sympathetically, recalling the night he'd come back to the Byers' house with El and found him lying prone on the floor. The extent of his injuries then had only been a bloody nose; he was considerably worse off now.

"You call his parents?" he asked, scrutinizing the condition he was in.

"Yes, we managed to contact his father."

"He coming in?"

"No." Hopper turned to the doctor with a look of surprise on his face. The man could do nothing but shrug. "He said he'd come by in the morning."

"You tell him how bad off he was?" Hopper asked, feeling a bit bewildered. The man's kid was in the hospital, and he couldn't be asked to come in and see him?

"I relayed to him the severity of his condition, yes," Roberts said. "I don't think he quite understood that his son could be dead by the morning."

'That or he doesn't give a damn,' he thought. He had to remember that some people were like that, but would have to reserve judgement until he actually met the boy's father. If his dad wasn't interested in coming in, there wasn't much he could do about that short of driving out to their home and dragging him out to see.

Frowning, Hopper redirected his attention back to Billy. There was a thin sheen of sweat gathered across his face, a slightly twisted look of pain gracing his features. He was in a bad way, alright.

"Did you have anyone contact the Harringtons?" he asked while he was thinking about family.

Again, the doctor looked dismayed. "No one answered at the Harrington household. We tried multiple times."

Hopper's frown grew deeper. "These kids not have parents or what?" he muttered, looking back at the boy on the bed somberly. "Where'd you pull the teeth from?" he asked, moving on.

The doctor stepped up beside him and used a pen to point with. "We pulled one from his trapezius muscle here," he said, indicating the section of gauze that was stuck near his neck, "and another two from the shoulder and bicep."

Hopper hummed thoughtfully. Whatever had attacked him hadn't been fucking around.

"You said before his wounds were tremendous," he said, looking up from the body lying out on the bed. "What makes them so 'tremendous'?"

Dr. Roberts looked uncomfortable and, using his pen again, directed Hopper's attention back to the left arm.

"Well, like I said, the Brachial artery was cut in addition to the arm being broken, but arguably the worst part was that he'd been *skinned* in places," he explained, appearing puzzled and disconcerted. He stared down at the arm and then up at Hopper, projecting his confusion onto him. "And I'm not talking just a little bit, like a scrape or something; he's missing huge strips of flesh from where whatever

'bear' attacked him must have clawed it away. I've never seen anything like it."

Hopper grunted and scratched his forehead, unsure of what he was meant to make of everything. A lot of it was just plain bizarre, and eluded his level of comprehension. He suddenly became aware of how little he'd slept, his tiredness beginning to creep back into him, stiffening his joints and resting heavily upon his eyelids. All he wanted to do in that moment was leave so he could get back to bed.

But he had work to do.

"Show me the teeth."

Hopper wound up taking the teeth, kept in a plastic, medically labeled baggie to use as evidence of an animal attack. Steve and Billy didn't have the cleanest track record between them, and the teeth could be used to prove that they hadn't just been fighting each other again when things got out of hand. Not that he thought Steve was capable of hurting Billy quite so badly, but sometimes people needed to see the definitive proof. He kept looking at them as he walked back down the hallway towards the waiting room, holding them up to the fluorescent lights above as if they would illuminate some secret they hid and show him the answers he was looking for.

Initially having thought he might be able to recognize them if they had come from one of the Demo creatures, he found that he couldn't be sure. They didn't look like the teeth that rimmed the terrible flowered heads of those creatures, but, then again, they didn't look like anything he'd seen before, either. They were long, narrow, and looked more like the teeth that one would find lining the mouths of fish that lived in the shadowy depths of the ocean. They were, in a word, horrific. He pocketed the baggie carefully as he walked into the waiting room, hiding them away for later contemplation.

Steve jumped at the noise of the doors opening and looked around in a dazed fashion as Hopper stepped through them. He was holding a cup full of a dark liquid that the receptionist had given to him, but it didn't look like he'd drank any of it. As Hopper approached him, he plucked the cup from his hands and drank a bit himself. It was

lukewarm and had too much sugar in it to be good.

"Let's get you home," he said, expecting Steve to look relieved to finally be leaving. He didn't; if anything, this appeared to stress him out, a tight look pinching the features of his face. "I'll give you a ride."

"What about my car?" Steve asked.

"We'll worry about that later."

He didn't appear satisfied by Hopper's answer. A slight frown twitched at his lips, but all the same Steve stood up and made to put on his coat, jamming one arm into the sleeve that was still there and the other into the hole. He stared at his bare arm poking through the torso of his coat, appearing baffled before turning his wide, brown eyes on Hopper. There was a helpless sort of quality he was exhibiting that Hopper couldn't say he liked. He placed a hand to Steve's shoulder and guided him out the hospital doors, dropping the styrofoam cup still half full of sweet coffee into a trash bin on their way out.

Hopper shivered as the cold struck them, but Steve didn't. He was on auto-pilot mode, the traumas he'd endured over the course of the night finally taking their toll. Hopper had to lead him to where his truck was parked and open the door for him, gently coaxing him to getting into the seat. Shutting the door after him, he rounded around the front of the truck and got in the driver's seat, starting the engine and turning the heat on full blast to warm up the cab.

There were questions Hopper had that he wanted to ask, but with the state Steve was in, he didn't want to press the issue until he was ready to talk. He turned the radio on, trying to create a comfortable environment for them to share, but all he could catch were religious talk show stations. His first instinct was to cut the radio off, but the need to have some sort of ambient noise kept him from doing so. Instead, he turned it way down low, so the preacher's voice was little more than a murmur as he drove out of the parking lot. Steve remained catatonic until Hopper pulled out onto the road, preparing to drive over to the Harrington household to drop him off when he suddenly sat bolt upright.

"It wasn't a bear!" he blurted out, looking around him with a sense of urgency, as though he couldn't remember where he was or who he was with.

"Relax kid, I figured out that much," Hopper said, attempting to placate him. Steve's breath was coming in rapid, wheezing gasps, alarming Hopper as he drove. "You need to calm down, okay? You're hyperventilating."

"Not a bear," Steve repeated, whispering as he shut his eyes and focused on calming his breaths using the technique he'd had to employ earlier that night. Once he got a better handle over himself, he opened them again and appeared much more relaxed.

"You good now?" Hopper asked, eyeing him cautiously. He caught Steve's nod and refocused his attention on the road. "Wanna tell me what it is you think you saw?"

Swallowing thickly, Steve looked down at his hands. "I have no fucking clue what it was. It was this... really tall, humanoid looking thing, almost like the first monster, but bigger. Longer. Stretched out, almost."

The mental image made Hopper frown.

"Did it have a face?"

"No- I mean, yes, but it wasn't anything remotely human looking." He looked up from his hands, staring at Hopper's profile as he drove. "It had like, a wolf's head, or something."

"Or something," Hopper parroted back at him.

"I know how it sounds!" Steve snapped. "You asked what I saw, and that's what I saw." Running a shaky hand through his hair, he sat back in his seat. "Whatever it was, I don't think it came from the same place as those other things."

"The Upside Down," Hopper supplied, voice taking on a monotonous tone as he thought over what Steve was saying.

"Yeah, that. It wasn't like those Demo things, though; it was

something... different."

Their conversation dissolved at that point, with each of them thinking over and reflecting on what had happened in the span of a night. Studying the scenery as it flew past him in darkened blurs, Steve wondered where the creature had gone and whether or not it would try to attack him again. The thought of having to face it again frightened him as he listened to the passionate, subdued voice of the pastor as he gave his sermon to the empty space between them.

"It's still out there," Steve said forlornly, eyes never moving from where they were fixed and staring out the window. The truth of it hit him hard, causing him to shudder in his seat. His arm throbbed, forcing him to remember the attack in its entirety, and in the back of his mind he could still hear Billy screaming.

"We'll get to the bottom of it, kid." Hopper's voice was mercifully grounding. Steve looked over at him, his fear slowly whittling away when Hopper looked back at him reassuringly. He found security he hadn't known he needed in the chief of police's face, comforting him further. "We know how to handle monsters. Gotten pretty good at it at this point."

That may be, but there was nothing they could do about it tonight. There was no way of knowing where it was, or where it had gone, and whether or not it still wanted to kill him. Even if they were pretty much licensed monster hunters, what would happen to him if Hopper dropped him off at his empty home and caught him unawares after the chief had gone?

'*Safety in numbers*,' he remembered Billy saying.

"Look, I know it might be against regulation or whatever, but... " Steve trailed off, unable to finish his thought as he drifted back into silence.

"But?" Hopper encouraged, driving slowly through the winter-logged roads. He was so, so tired. The heat being pumped through the air vents was beginning to make him truly drowsy.

"Could I like, stay the night at your place?" Steve asked hurriedly,

embarrassment colouring his cheeks. "I don't know the police code about letting victims stay at their homes, but my parents are out of town, and these pain meds are making me paranoid as shit, my arm still hurts, and it's *still out there*, and I can't stop *thinking* about it-"

"Kid-" Hopper tried to interject, glancing at him briefly during his tirade.

"And like, what if Billy was right? What if it follows me home? My arm's fucked and I don't even have my *bat* with me anymore- not that I could even *use* it like this-"

"Steve." He shut up, the sternness with which Hopper spoke silencing him. Again, rather balefully, he turned his deep brown eyes on the Chief. He looked as vulnerable as a doe might look staring down the barrel of a hunter's rifle, caught with her fawn by her leg. "It's fine. You can have the couch," Hopper said tiredly.

Steve bit his lower lip and nodded thankfully. He looked away, back out the window as Hopper performed a sloppy U-turn in the road to take them back in the direction of his cabin.

Above the pain, stronger than the level of sedation he was supposed to be under, and before he could even think coherently, Billy felt *heat*. Liquid fire was coursing through his veins, spreading throughout his body like a burning flood. It felt like his skin was melting, sloughing off his bones in heaps. Whenever he surfaced to consciousness, however briefly, he struggled to kick off the pile of blankets his nurse had him tucked under.

She would appear as he thrashed about, looking miserable and exhausted with having to resituate the blankets over his body. When he calmed down and sank back into unconsciousness, she dutifully reapplied the blankets and waited for the next episode to come. The boy's internal body heat was frighteningly low, and it was her job to make sure it didn't drop below a certain level, but despite how low his temperature readings were, her patient was constantly soaked in sweat.

"He's displaying fever-like symptoms, but he doesn't have a fever,"

she'd told the doctor after one of his episodes. She didn't understand why that was, and why he kept moaning about how hot he was when he was at a dangerously low level of body heat.

"All we can do at this point is keep him warm." Dr. Roberts was just as puzzled as she was, but did a better job of hiding it. "Use heated water flasks if you need to."

She did as she was told. All night long, as Billy kicked away the blankets and knocked the flasks to the floor, she reapplied them when she could. Sometimes he would stay conscious long enough to yell at her and demand what the hell she was doing when he was so clearly burning up in her care and even beg her to stop or bring in a fan.

Her attempts to soothe his distress were met with violence, and eventually they'd had to come to terms with it and being strap him down to the bed so he was no longer at risk of hurting himself or the staff.

All night he felt the fire; all night he felt like his skin was blistering and peeling and falling off. All night he strained against the restraints, desperate to escape the heat but unable to do so.

Then, as the morning came, he finally began to feel cool. His body ceased working against him, and his internal temperature stabilized. The hellish heat that had been so all-consuming was gone, breaking away as though he really had been struggling to beat a fever.

When he finally woke up, groggy and unaware of his surroundings, he glanced around the room he was being kept in and made eye contact with his father, standing at the foot of his bed and watching him disapprovingly.

"Dad," he croaked, voice hoarse before he passed back out again.

6. No Future Part One

Standing in the kitchen that was lit only by the dim overhead lights and the sparse, pale sunlight streaming in through the windows, Hopper stared down at the stovetop and watched as the eye slowly began to turn red. His own eyes were sunken and void of expression, heavy-lidded as they fought to stay open long enough to get some coffee brewing and maybe make the kids some kind of breakfast. It wouldn't be much; he wasn't a very good cook yet and didn't have much to work with besides those frozen waffles Eleven loved so much and maybe a half dozen eggs, but it didn't have to be a lot- it just had to be enough to carry them through the morning, if not the day.

"He's in a bad dream."

He blinked, his eyelids fluttering when he realized he'd drifted into a light doze while standing. Eleven's voice floated in from the living room, easily heard despite her low tone; a quiet sound that was loud in the absence of any other noises. She stood a few steps away from the boy she'd found sleeping on their couch when she'd left her room that morning, peering intently at the scrunched up expression on his face curiously. With her head cocked slightly to the side, she watched as he twitched occasionally and let out pitiful noises of distress.

Hopper sighed and rubbed his eyes in an attempt to remove the last few sands of sleep that lingered there.

"Leave him alone," he said after a moment, sounding haggard from his own lack of sleep. He bit back a yawn and flicked away some crust he'd picked out of his eye. Part of him wished he was in Steve's position and was able to sleep-in for a few more hours, but with what the kid had told him last night, he'd known he was in for a long day that would start as early as it possibly could. He'd woken up with the weight of his responsibilities already pressing down urgently upon him and hadn't been able to rest properly as a result. Thoughts that it could have been another creature from the Upside Down had not stopped tormenting him throughout the night.

It was mornings like these that really made it hard to enjoy his line of work.

"It's bad," he heard Eleven say, turning over her shoulder to look briefly at her caretaker before reverting her attention back to Steve. "He looks scared."

"He had a rough night," Hopper said, unable to keep the yawn at bay any longer. His voice broke as it spilled out of him, jumbling his words together in a clumsy heap. "Don't wake him up. Whatever's haunting him, it's only a dream."

The rings on the stove were bright red as he finally dragged his frying pan over them. The half-full carton of eggs was sitting on the counter nearby, open and ready for him to grab at his convenience. Taking two, he cracked them against the edge of the counter and poured the contents into the hot pan and watched as they slowly began to bubble up. He didn't bother whisking them before scrambling.

Still standing idly by the couch, Eleven hummed thoughtfully and reached out to brush a stray lock of Steve's hair away from his face. He flinched away from her in his sleep, burrowing further into the thin nest of blankets he'd been provided but remained undisturbed otherwise. His reaction brought a small smile to her lips as she looked back to Hopper, who'd stopped with what he was doing to shake his head at her.

"El," he said sternly, leaving the eggs alone for a moment to get his coffee machine started, "let him sleep."

"Who is he?" She spared Steve one last look before stepping away and walking toward the small kitchen table. She pulled out a chair and sat in it to watch Hopper turn down the heat on the eggs and run a spatula through them. "I've seen him before. Mike's friend?"

"He's a little old to be Mike's friend," he grunted, unsure of how to explain Steve's allegiance when he didn't quite understand it himself. Whenever something went down, the kid was always just *there*. No one had taken the time yet to explain to him just how that kept happening. He was beginning to think the boy had chronic 'wrong place, wrong time' syndrome.

"Not Mike's friend?" she asked curiously. She slouched forward onto the table, crossing her arms to let her chin rest upon them. Her eyes

tracked his movements, watching as he clumsily scrambled the eggs.

"I don't know, he probably is," he said, sighing deeply and trying his best to be patient with her. He was too sleep deprived to fully take the time to answer her questions in a satisfactory manner. "All I know is he's involved in all this somehow. Maybe not *Mike's* friend, but a friend. An ally."

"Ally?"

"Someone you know is on your side when shit hits the fan."

Despite the bruntiness with which he answered her, she seemed to be satisfied by his response; she didn't ask anymore questions about Steve, allowing him to continue cooking without distraction. He was aware of Eleven's deep brown eyes watching him as he worked, but was still too tired to make any kind of conversation with her beyond the words they'd already shared.

It wasn't too long after that when they heard Steve wake up, groaning aloud as an indescribable amount of pain raced up the length of his arm. He hissed at the terrible throbbing sensation as he shakily pulled his arm out from underneath him, having rolled onto it sometime during the night. The stitches he'd received seemed to be straining tightly against his skin, the threads pulling the gashes open rather than keeping them closed as they were meant to. He imagined he could feel each and every individual entry point for all the stitches he'd received being stretched wide as the tingling that came with lack of blood flow began to creep along his arm. Wincing, he tried to move into a more comfortable position and wished the doctor who'd treated him had decided to prescribe him something for the pain.

Face-deep in the cushions of the thinly cushioned couch he barely remembered passing out on, he slowly, *carefully*, rolled over to relieve some of the pain that seemed to be centralized in his shoulder. His joints were stiff, and his muscles began to scream at him when he tried to put them to use. With his eyes closed, he tried to will himself to sleep through the pain for just a bit longer when he heard a girl speak close by.

"He's awake," she announced, eyes glancing from Hopper to Steve

excitedly.

"No 'm not," he grumbled in response, but cracked his eyes open anyway, unable to feign sleep any longer.

He felt his jaw click as he opened his mouth wide to yawn and slowly moved so he was sitting upright. He began to stretch out of habit but stopped abruptly as the pain resurfaced, stabbing into his arm sharply when he tried to move it. Grunting, he grit his teeth before coming to a stand, running his good hand through his hair to assess how it had held up overnight. He couldn't work his fingers through it without them getting caught in knots, most of the strands sticky and stiff with product he hadn't been able to wash or brush out the night before.

"Hope you like eggs and Eggos, kid," Hopper grunted in lieu of a greeting as he pulled out the yellow package from the freezer and opened it to pop a few waffles into the toaster by his coffee maker.

"Hey, if I'm not making it, I'm not picky," Steve replied, sounding melancholy as he sighed and took his hand away from his hair before he could make it any worse. He slowly made his way into the kitchen, where the girl he'd heard before was sitting at the table watching him with interest. The smell of slowly cooking eggs mixed with the aroma of the coffee made him keenly aware of how hungry he was, and he couldn't stop the growl that rumbled lowly in his stomach.

Eleven was watching him closely as he lowered himself into the seat opposite of her at the table. There was nothing in the space between them, giving them an unhindered look at one another as a brief look of familiarity crossed Steve's features when she offered him a shy smile.

"You're that uh-" he paused to snap his fingers, as though the action would help him to jog his memory, "that uh, kid. From that night. With the dogs."

"Mike's friend," she said to clarify, to which Steve nodded.

"Sure, yeah; Mike's friend," he affirmed.

They shared a friendly smile before Hopper set a plate with waffles on it down in front of him, breaking his focus. He gave a plate to Eleven as well and then set one down for himself before stepping away to grab the frying pan full of eggs. He scooped a helping out onto each of their plates and then stepped away again to grab silverware for everyone and coffee for himself.

As Hopper busied himself behind them, Steve looked back to Eleven and said, "So, does Mike's friend have a name?"

She nodded, but before she replied her eyes flit to where Hopper was currently pouring out a cup of coffee. He raised his eyebrows expectantly at her in return, trusting her to tell him the right thing. "Jane," she finally answered, looking back to Steve.

"Jane," he repeated, smiling at her in a way he knew most women found comforting. He mistook her brief aversion of eye contact for bashfulness. "I'm Steve."

"I like your hair," she said with a cheeky grin, and he broke out into a laugh.

"It's a little crazy right now, I'll admit," he said, feeling self-conscious but chuckling anyway as Hopper finally sat down with them, setting his cup of coffee aside as he began passing out forks. "Speaking of, think I could catch a shower after this?" he asked hopefully.

"Gonna have to shower on your own time," Hopper replied, swallowing down a bite of waffle with a deep drink of coffee. "We got a lot to do today."

"We?" Steve frowned, pausing with a forkful of food halfway to his mouth. "I was under the impression that you were just gonna take me home."

"And I was under the impression you didn't *want* to go home," Hopper replied, half-joking but still serious enough to make the statement. Steve's face fell as Hopper continued to eat, unhindered by the direction their conversation had taken. When Steve didn't reply or even make a move to eat, he sighed and set his fork down long enough to explain. "We're going to go by the hospital first to pick up

your car, and then you're going to lead me out to where the incident happened. Then after you tell me where the other parties were held, you'll get to go home, have your shower, call your parents, and whatever else."

A miserable look spread across Steve's face as he glanced downward, prodding half-heartedly at his food. "Well can I at least borrow some clothes then?" he asked after a moment, gesturing to his arm where his sleeve had been cut away.

Hopper studied him thoughtfully, taking in the noticeably large splotches of dried blood that were spread out across the rest of his sweater from where he'd had to help support Billy as they'd fled from the woods. The deep, dark colour of the blood stains contrasted darkly against the light cream colour the ruined sweater used to be, leaving absolutely no room to think that they were somehow part of a design.

"Anything we have here would either be too big or too small," Hopper said after a moment, but he knew he wouldn't be able to walk around with Steve looking like he did; it risked questions being asked that he didn't yet have answers to. "But that'll have to do it for ya."

Steve heaved a heavy sigh, but rather than linger too long on his misfortune, he finally did begin to eat. "I can wear something big over something small, I guess," he said.

Despite trying to keep his thinking positive, Steve found himself struggling to remain optimistic about his circumstances. All he could think of was how badly his arm hurt, and how all he really wanted to do was shower and sleep and forget any of last night had even happened. And he *would* have to call his parents eventually; what was he supposed to tell them when he did? What possible excuse could he come up with to explain how his arm had become so fucked up? 'Bear attack' was only going to carry him so far, but he had time to think about it. At least he'd become a well-versed liar when it came to withholding critical details over the course of the year.

A quiet observer to their conversation, Eleven studied the two of them closely when they spoke, her eyes flitting between them as she ate silently, content for the time being just to listen. She tried to

piece together on her own what they were talking about, but when their words ran dry and her comprehension of what was going on waned, she looked to Hopper for guidance. Suspiciously though, he seemed to be avoiding looking at her, focusing instead on eating and not much else. Her usual readiness to devour her morning Eggos was subdued by the revelation that he didn't *want* her to know what was going on.

Squinting at him ever so slightly, she turned to Steve and asked, "What happened to you?"

"A bear got him," Hopper said, intervening quickly before Steve had a chance to even open his mouth. A stern look from the chief told him he didn't get to say anything otherwise. "It attacked a party in the woods last night. Someone's still missing."

"Got me pretty good," Steve said weakly, unsure of how he was supposed to portray himself to support what Hopper was saying.

"A bear," she said doubtfully, turning back to her guardian who still wouldn't meet her eye.

When Hopper first brought Eleven to the cabin secluded in the woods, he'd discussed what animals were dangerous with her and which weren't. On the list of animals that she should look out for had been bears, yes, but he had also told her then that bears in this area were rare and that they weren't all that aggressive this time of year anyway.

"It's called hibernating," he'd told her. "It means they go to sleep for a few months; you probably won't even see one until it gets warmer."

There was anger in her eye when Hopper finally did meet her gaze; anger that had lain dormant and carried over from past conversations. He knew that she knew he was lying, but until he could figure out what exactly the thing that had attacked the boys last night was, he didn't want to worry her or get her unnecessarily involved. If she was truly angry with him (which he knew she was), then he'd deal with it later after his preliminary investigation. Hopefully by then he'd have *some* answers.

But, at the same time, he didn't want her trust in him to regress on any level. He'd have to make a compromise on what he could tell her now and what he would be able to tell her later to ensure that didn't happen.

"We don't actually know *what* it was, Jane." Some of the anger she'd been directing towards him dissipated as he began to speak honestly. "A bear is our best guess right now. I wasn't there so I can't say for certain what it was, but I'm going out today to try and figure it out."

There was a tenseness to the table now that Steve didn't understand. Jane was angry about something- that much was obvious- but whatever it was and whether or not it involved him evaded him. She and Hopper remained locked in eye contact until finally Jane relented.

"Okay," she said simply, and then went back to eating, all trace of her anger now gone.

The rest of the meal was spent making small talk, with Hopper and Eleven telling Steve what they owned that could possibly fit him until they were each done eating. As Hopper took their dishes away and dumped them into the sink, Eleven guided Steve into her room, wherein she bid him to take a seat on her bed while she went through her wardrobe. He waited patiently as she looked through her clothes, pulling out various shirts and holding them up for his judgement until she grabbed hold of what was probably the biggest sweater she owned.

Light green in colour, it looked like it might be able to at least fit across his shoulders even if it wouldn't completely cover his torso. Obviously a hand-me-down of some sort, it wasn't the most attractive thing in the world, but anything would look better on him now than what he currently wore. He took it gratefully and went to change in the bathroom, carefully pulling his ruined sweater over his head in a way that wouldn't agitate his stitches or strain his muscles too badly. His arm was stiff and hard to move as he tried to carefully work it into the sleeve that was a little too small and clung tightly to his bicep. The sleeve itself didn't extend much further than his elbow, but still managed to cover most of the bandages that dressed his arm. Sticking his other arm through the second sleeve without issue, he

pulled the garment down and was dismayed to find that the bottom hem of the sweater stopped just above his navel.

Regardless of whether or not he thought he could rock a crop top, no matter which way he turned to examine how he looked in the mirror, he couldn't ignore the fact that he just plain looked like shit.

Felt like it, too.

Sighing, he turned on the tap and let the water run out over his good hand before he ran it through his hair, trying to give it a short, impromptu rinse to at least cleanse it of some of the stale product he'd left in overnight. The end result left it looking tamer, certainly, but also left it with a greasy sort of sheen he knew only a good wash would solve.

"Let's go, kid," Hopper said, knocking insistently at the door to hurry him along. "The sooner we leave, the sooner you can go home."

Resigned to looking as terrible as he did, he opened the door and stepped out of the bathroom. Hopper was waiting for him nearby, and offered him a large military jacket that encapsulated him completely when he put it on. True to Hopper's word, the coat was far too large on him and hung off his lanky frame like a potato sack, but it at least managed to cover what Eleven's sweater could not.

Amusement was clear and evident in Eleven's eyes when she saw him, a smile growing wide across her face before she let out a slight laugh at his appearance. Rather than be embarrassed, Steve rolled his eyes but shared in her grin as he rolled up the sleeves so they wouldn't hang too far over his hands.

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up," he said.

Dressed in full uniform and his long coat, Hopper's lips shifted into a slight smirk before he gestured for Steve to follow him out the door. It was warmer than it had been yesterday, but the winter itself was still frigid enough to make him shiver when he stepped out into the , it seemed as though the coat and sweater combo were thick enough to keep most of it at bay. As they stepped off the porch and into the slushy snow, Steve turned back to thank Jane for loaning him the

sweater only to find that she wasn't following them, and that she had, in fact, closed and locked the door behind them after they'd left.

Surprised, he followed after Hopper as he began to lead them to where he kept his truck parked and asked, "Is she not coming with us?"

"No," Hopper said, sounding sterner than he'd meant to.

"You're just going to leave her here alone?" Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Jane watching them through the window. She waved at him, and he gave an uncertain wave back.

"You don't know her circumstances, kid."

"I mean, it just kinda seems like bad parenting," he said before he could even think about what he was saying to the chief of police.

He braced himself for an argument, but rather than get angry with him, Hopper instead only sighed.

"Trust me, I know," he replied, tone bitter and voice dry.

The parking lot of the hospital was surprisingly full when they arrived. Steve hadn't anticipated that there would be that many people there, as the hour was early and he honestly hadn't thought that the supply and demand of the hospital was large enough to warrant so many people being there so soon in the day.

The truck rambled up to the emergency room entrance and stalled for a moment. Giving the area a cursory glance, Steve soon realized that his car was not where he'd left it, or even there at all. When he'd pulled up with Billy the night before, he hadn't had time to park his car properly. He'd nearly ran it up the curb in his haste to get Billy seen, justifiably afraid that he was going to bleed out and die in his passenger seat if he didn't get someone out there to help him as quickly as he could. Stomach sinking, he wondered if the staff would have had it towed for obstructing the sidewalk.

Speaking this concern aloud, Hopper could only shrug in response.

"Might've," he said, putting the truck into gear to loop them around the parking lot to see if they'd had it towed into a parking spot instead of having it transported off grounds entirely.

"Shit," he moaned as they completed the circuit through the broad lot. The burgundy BMW was nowhere to be seen as they made their patrol. "Fuck. What now?"

"We go in and ask who they got to tow it." With the search for his car called off momentarily, Hopper found a parking spot midway through the lot and pulled into it. "You can stay here if you want; shouldn't take longer than a minute."

"I'll come," Steve said with a shrug. The heating in the truck was minimal at best, and if he went inside, at least he could wait in the lobby where there would be guaranteed heating if it turned out that figuring out who'd taken his car ended up taking longer than the predicted minute.

After Hopper cut the engine, they stepped out of the truck and made their way inside.

The sliding doors slid open when they approached them, and immediately Steve felt the warmth flood him as they approached the check-in counter. He couldn't help but let his eyes roam across the lobby as they strode towards the desk, wondering perhaps if the other nameless victim of the attack had somehow managed to make it to the hospital on their own. He didn't *want* to think that they were probably dead after being dismembered, but he saw no sign of anyone who'd recently lost an arm.

Leading the way, Hopper addressed the secretary on duty and spoke, saying, "Kid came in here last night with another injured boy and left his car. I got the kid here, but can't find his car."

"The BMW from last night?" she asked, looking bored and overall inconvenienced to have to be doing her job. Hopper looked to Steve to confirm. With a nod, Steve approached the counter to hear what fate had befallen his car. "We had it towed. You left it in the middle of the emergency drop-off landing; it was a hazard and a nuisance."

Steve groaned and dragged a hand through his hair and down his face.

"Bad things come in threes, kid," Hopper said to Steve, a hint of amusement in his voice. Addressing the receptionist again, he asked, "What towing service do you use?"

As he'd predicted, it was a lot warmer in the lobby than it had been in the truck. While he let Hopper do the talking, Steve made a motion to take off the coat when he felt himself warming, but caught himself when he remembered what it was he was wearing underneath. Instead, he rolled the sleeves of the coat up a little bit more, struggling to fold the cloth over his injury as Hopper worked out the details of where his car had been taken. He opted out of listening and once again let his gaze wander, looking around at the people in the area, all of whom looked miserable to be spending their Sunday morning in the hospital's waiting room.

Nothing of importance differed with his secondary scan of the room, except this time he realized that he actually recognized someone. Startled by his oversight, he had no idea how he'd missed the bright, shocking hue of her red hair before.

Billy's sister was sitting in a chair with her eyes closed, slouched slightly to the side and resting on the armrest between the seats. He would have thought she was asleep save for the fact that she kept repositioning her legs, trying to get comfortable in a seat that wasn't made for comfort. She was sitting in the corner furthest from the door, and was alone on all fronts.

"I'll be right back," he muttered to the chief, moving away from Hopper regardless of whether he'd been heard or not.

Making his way towards her, he wondered who she was here with. It was no secret that she didn't particularly care much for Billy, and doubted she was here out of concern for her older brother's well-being unless she'd been dragged there against her will.

"Max!" he said, prompting her to open her eyes and look up at him with some amount of surprise when he got closer.

"Steve?" she asked, sitting up from her slouched over position. She looked tired, he noticed, as he took a seat beside her. Her hair was messy and seemed half-brushed, as though she'd been woken in a hurry and hastened to get to the hospital "What are you doing here?"

"Could ask you the same thing," he replied, and then did: "What are *you* doing here?"

A strong look of annoyance crossed over her features, her shock at seeing him dismissed in favor of confiding in him the source of her troubles. She sat back into her seat, a pout curving her lips into a frown as she explained, "My mom's out of town and Neil wouldn't leave me home alone. All because Billy got into a fight or something. *Again.*"

"Fight?" Steve asked, confused about the vehemence behind her tone before he realized that she didn't know anything about the incident at all. "You're here because of what attacked us last night?"

Max's frustration turned into confusion, her brow furrowing slightly. "Us'? What do you mean 'attacked'?"

"I was there," Steve said, stiffly trying to shrug out of the jacket so he could show Max his arm. She watched as he made short, awkward jerking motions to get his arm out of the sleeve to show her. "Whatever got him fucked me up too."

With the jacket off, he peeled back the sleeve of the small sweater so she could see the bandages that wound up his arm. Her eyes widened at the sight, mouth opening into a slight 'o' of concern.

"Was it the dogs?" she asked, her voice dropping to a concerned whisper. Her attention didn't drift from the injury, her eyes trailing up and down the length of his arm.

"No," he said, sounding more self-assured than he actually felt.

"Then what was it?"

"Have you seen your brother yet?" he deferred, unwilling to talk about what had happened in a public space. There weren't many people near them, but he still wasn't sure who could be listening.

"No," she admitted, finally taking her focus away from his arm, wrinkling her nose when Steve referred to Billy as her brother. "Neil left me here as soon as we got in. Which was like, an hour ago."

Annoyance tampered with her features again as she ranted, pissed that her Sunday morning had been robbed from her. She told him that she'd planned on sleeping in late and watching cartoons for a bit before she went to hang out with Lucas, but her day wasn't going to be salvageable if they stuck around the hospital for much longer.

"Who are you here with anyway?" she asked as though she'd just now remembered where they were. "Don't tell me you came because of *Billy*."

"God, no," he said, mimicking her earlier expression of distaste at the mention of Billy's name, but since she'd mentioned it, he had to admit that he was kind of curious as to how he was holding up.

Nobody last night had told him how Billy was doing after he'd brought him in. The nurses had shuttled him around with an indifferent efficiency until his arm had been patched up, and then he'd been ignored and made to wait in the very room he was in now until Hopper had bothered to come pick him up

Despite what he'd just told her, he found that he was, in fact, a little bit concerned for him after all.

Looking back to the secretary's desk, he saw that Hopper was no longer there. His surprise in relation to his disappearance was short lived when he saw that he was making his way towards them, holding his police hat in hand. Max watched him approach with benign indifference.

"They want me to talk to the father," he said once he got closer, looking rather irritated. "Billy hasn't woken up yet and his dad wants to know what happened. We'll get your car after."

The last that Steve had heard about Billy's condition was that he was unconscious and barely hanging on, and if he still hadn't woken up yet then that must've meant he was still in a pretty bad way.

"Is he going to be okay?" Max asked, voicing what Steve wanted to know without having to outright ask about it.

"Should be," Hopper replied casually. Whether or not that was true, he didn't know, but the nurse who'd approached him while he'd been talking to the secretary seemed to think that he'd be alright. "Gonna go ahead and get that settled; I'll be back."

As he turned to walk away, Steve stood up to follow, cradling the jacket in his arms as he said, "Can I come?"

"Thought you weren't here for Billy," Max said, snickering as she spoke in a mocking tone of voice.

"I'm not," Steve retorted, bristling slightly at having been called out on his supposed indifference.

"Suuuuuuure."

"Don't see why not," Hopper said, watching the exchange with a hint of amusement. "C'mon, then, let's get this over with."

"Catch you later, Max," Steve said, sticking his tongue out at her childishly when Hopper turned his back on them.

Max shook her head and rolled her eyes, but flashed him the peace sign before going back to trying to sleep in her seat, slouching over onto the armrest again and resuming the position he'd originally found her in.

Navigating their way past hospital staff and other waiting patrons, they made their way across the lobby towards the elevator. "Did they tell you how he was doing?" Steve asked once they'd gotten inside. The doors shut softly behind him as Hopper pressed the button for the third floor.

"Only that he was stable and that his dad was pissed."

'Pissed' was probably putting it kindly; the orderly who'd spoken to Hopper went into great detail about how livid the Hargrove kid's dad had been when he'd gotten there. He hadn't stopped complaining about how no one knew what had happened to his son, and

apparently couldn't wait to get his hands on the chief.

'But if he was so concerned,' Hopper thought to himself, 'he would have come in when he'd been called.'

Thinking like that wasn't fair, though; he hadn't met the man yet and could reserve judgement for after he'd dealt with him. The elevator dropped them off at their floor with a polite ding, opening up to a broad hallway with a plethora of rooms. The woman working the desk had told Hopper which room the Hargrove kid was in, but he didn't need to worry about missing it.

The hallway was empty save for a man he assumed was Billy's father and the doctor that Hopper had spoken with last night. They were arguing with one another outside of the door he assumed led to Billy's room, each of them attempting to keep their voices low but not really succeeding in that aspect. Despite this, he couldn't quite make out what they were arguing about. Steve heard Hopper heave a sigh before he led the way towards them, getting ready to break up their disagreement with all the civil authority he could muster.

"Mr. Hargrove," he said, interrupting the argument easily by inserting himself between the two men. He extended his hand towards him in greeting and placed his hat back on his head. "Jim Hopper, chief of Hawkins Police"

Neil Hargrove lost whatever momentum he'd had when Hopper approached him, completely dismantling his argument. The doctor looked relieved by this, and as Billy's dad begrudgingly shook Jim's hand, he excused himself by saying, "Hopper can tell you everything you wish to know about the incident, Mr. Hargrove. I'm sorry you found my answers to your questions so unsatisfactory that you felt the need to try and belittle me with such a crude use of the English language."

A look of utter contempt briefly flashed across Neil's face as the doctor haughtily turned on his heel and walked away, content with having gotten the last word.

"This whole damn hospital's unsatisfactory," Neil muttered under his breath before fixing Hopper with his attention.

The door to Billy's room was cracked open, and from within it Steve could hear the steady beeping noises of the monitors he'd been hooked up to. He took a step toward it, glancing in through the small space to see if he could see anything worth noticing.

"This is Steve Harrington." At the mention of his name, Steve looked around to see that the two men were now looking at him. Billy's father had a look on his face that resembled the way he'd looked after the doctor when he'd left. "He's the one who saved your son last night."

Unsure of what to do, Steve repositioned the coat he was carrying to hang over his right arm so he could shake with his left.

"Mr. Hargrove," he said, trying to remain polite despite the scrutinizing look he was being given.

A look he could understand being given, though; he must've looked outrageous walking around the hospital wearing clothes that were obviously too small for him with his hair looking how it did. Regardless of the silent criticism he was being given, Neil shook his hand with a firm and unyielding grip.

"Harrington," Neil said in gruff acknowledgment, parroting the exact way Billy sometimes spoke his name: with thinly masked distaste. He took his hand away from his quickly and wiped it on the leg of his pants as though he'd come into contact with something foul. The motion didn't go unnoticed by Steve, who kept the frown he wanted to express to himself.

"Do you mind if I see him?" he asked instead of reacting, stepping back towards the opening in the doorway, uncomfortable now with being in the company of Neil Hargrove.

Billy's father looked like he wanted to say no, but Hopper spoke before he could deny him access.

"Go ahead, Steve; it'll give us time to talk out here."

Nodding in understanding, Steve slipped into the room and closed the door quietly behind him before Neil could tell him no. Through the

little window in the door, he could see that Billy's dad hadn't stopped glowering at him.

'He doesn't like me,' Steve thought, but he couldn't think of why he would unless Billy had been talking shit about him at home. Before he could think too much of it, he turned away and finally got his first look at Billy post near-death experience.

The arm that had gotten mangled in the creature's jaws was wrapped in bloodied bandages and was kept still by a splint. The doctors couldn't put a cast on it because of the huge, gaping wounds, and had been waiting to hear from his parent before making a decision on how to treat the gouging he'd received. His good arm was heavily bruised and plugged full of IVs.

There were small abrasions and multiple open cuts scattered over his body from what Steve could see of it. His head was tilted to the side, eyes closed as though he were merely sleeping and not borderline comatose. Approaching his bedside, he gazed down at the injured boy with some amount of pity, noticing the various scrapes that decorated his face. At least he didn't look quite so angry when he was unconscious.

He stepped back from the bed and glanced back towards the door when he heard Neil's voice raising in apparent anger. Through the clear paneling he could see the two adults engaged in conversation. Neil's face was starting to turn red, but Hopper looked as calm and collected as he would be if he were fishing. Close enough that he could hear the low sounds of their voices, but far enough away that he couldn't make out what was being said through the wooden door, Steve wondered what it was Billy's dad was so mad about as he seated himself in a chair that faced Billy's bed.

The beeping from the machines remained steady up until the point where Billy began to stir, the skin around the bridge of his nose pinching up as though he'd caught wind of something rancid. He sniffed once, twice, and then groggily opened his eyes, his once serene face morphing into an expression of disgust.

"Holy shit, Billy," Steve said, speaking with mild surprise as Billy groaned out in pain after having tried to move his splinted arm. He

could feel his pulse quickening, and if he'd been hooked up to the pulse monitor instead, he would have heard it beeping faster than it was currently. "Don't move, man."

Too doped up to properly hold his head upright to look around at him, Billy languidly turned his head towards Steve and peered at him with some amount of bemused perplexity.

"Jesus Harrington, they let you outta here lookin' like that?" His voice was low and hoarse when he spoke, rumbling forth from his body like a lazy wave slowly rolling in from the ocean.

"No, see, they fixed me up," he replied, assuming Billy was talking about the injury to his arm. He carefully rolled back the sleeve of the tight sweater enough to show him some of the bandages covering his wounds. Billy seemed to struggle with holding his focus on him, as he kept blinking his eyes in a way that reminded Steve of how some of his pot-head friends got when they were too high to focus properly.

They would just start blinking repeatedly, over and over again in a slow, sluggish motion as they tried to comprehend what was going on around them.

"Not yer fuckin' arm," Billy slurred eventually, curling his lip back in disgust when Steve got closer to show him. "Can't you fuckin' smell it? It's *festerin*."

"What?"

Confused, he took a step back and looked over his shoulder when the door to the room opened. Hopper let Neil enter first, but Steve didn't miss how they both looked cross with one another as they entered. The colouring in Neil's face had dissipated somewhat, but he was still noticeably angry with how their conversation had gone.

"Alright kid, let's get out of here," Hopper started to say, but stalled when he noticed that Billy was now awake.

Wordlessly Neil left the room, walking back out into the hallway to herald a doctor or a nurse to come and tend to his conscious son.

"It's your fuckin' hand," Billy drawled in a quiet whisper.

"There's nothing wrong with my hands," Steve insisted, holding them out to both reassure himself that there was nothing wrong with them and to prove to Billy that he was fine. For some reason, the fact that he'd mentioned his hand at all made him suddenly nervous.

But it didn't work. Billy turned his head sharply away and closed his eyes, repulsed by whatever it was he saw when he saw them. Baffled by the reaction, Steve looked them over again to make sure he hadn't missed something vitally important about the status of his hands and then glanced back to Hopper, who was looking just as bewildered as he felt.

"It *reeks* because you're letting it *fester*," Billy hissed, then let out a laugh that sent a chill down Steve's spine.

7. Danger and Dread

Because the owner of the towing company that had taken Steve's car knew his father, and partly because he'd shown up with the chief of police to retrieve it, they were allowed to pick up the BMW without charge. Whatever fines Steve would normally have had to pay were waived, but that didn't mean the owner let it go without question. The fact that Steve *had* arrived with the chief of police was enough of a question on its own, but that fact coupled with the fact that there was enough blood to paint nearly the entire passenger side of the car red when he'd towed it brought forth questions the man felt he deserved answers to.

"What's all this about?" he'd asked, looking from Hopper to Steve after he'd pulled the car off the impound lot for them. He'd stood with his hands on his hips, brow creased with concern and curiosity. When he spoke, the cigarette in his mouth bobbed up and down haphazardly. "Was someone killed in there? You taking it in for evidence? Lil' Stevie here in some kinda trouble?"

He'd laughed as he'd said it, but the look in his eye said he seriously wanted to know. Steve didn't know what he was and wasn't allowed to say, so avoided eye contact and kept quiet.

"That's police business," was all Hopper had said, but the brevity with which he spoke seemed to deter the man enough from prying anymore into their business.

"I should tell your dad," he'd said with an annoyed sneer that said he mistrusted what they were doing, but he'd wandered back and away into the small building that served as his office before either of them could tell him not to.

Not that it would matter much in the long run; Steve's dad was going to know all about it soon enough. He was due back from his latest business trip by the end of the week- clear weather permitting- and his imminent return was the main cause of one of his greatest points of anxiety. He was sure that there was going to be nothing, absolutely *nothing* he could say to his father that could possibly begin to explain why he'd put his *expensive, valuable* car through hell, but he felt that

he might be able to justify it since Billy's life had been on the line. There was no way of knowing how his father was going to react until he did.

Standing by the passenger side door, Steve stared in through the window at the mess waiting for him inside. Billy's blood was crusted and dried, splattered over most of the dashboard, drenching the interior with a saturated reddish-brown colour that almost matched the paint job of the exterior. It was gruesome to look at, and held his attention for a few seconds before he was able to finally look away, wondering in the back of his mind how on earth Billy had managed to survive when he'd lost *so much blood*. He didn't think it was humanly possible, but then again, he *had* failed biology; the human body was capable of more things than he was evidently aware of. He felt the weight of Hopper's hand on his shoulder and begrudgingly stirred out of his ruminations.

"We got work to do, pal," Hopper said, voice kind but stern with purpose.

The sky was looking heavy and grey, waiting to unload a fresh load of snow upon them. They were lucky that it hadn't snowed the night before, but they were going to have to hurry if they wanted to investigate before the area lost all the important details to a fresh snowfall.

"Yeah yeah, the sooner the better," Steve muttered, shrugging out of Hopper's touch as he walked around the side of the car towards the driver's side, where once again he found himself stalled, staring in at the blood coating the interior.

Touching the door handle was like reaching out to touch a forbidden object; it was something he didn't *want* to necessarily touch, but needed to in order to fully access his car. He felt like a little like that archaeologist from that one movie Dustin had forced him to watch ("Come on, Steve, we *live* in Indiana! How do you not know about the Jones?!") in that moment, with the amount of care and trepidation he utilized when he finally opened the door. His face pinched up immediately in disgust as the smell of the trapped air flooded out to greet him. The whole car stunk of slightly sweetened, old metals, and he was repulsed with the realization that the foul stench was the

stink of Billy's blood. It permeated throughout the vehicle, and he wondered how the fuck he would even begin to clean it. The smell alone was nauseating, but the sight of the large, brown spot where the blood had pooled in the passenger seat was almost worse.

There was going to be no cleaning that. It was far beyond the point of saving, he knew, as he slid into the driver's seat and gripped the steering wheel. The owner of the car lot left the key in the ignition for him, and as he turned it to start the engine, he was once again hit with the understanding that Billy had almost died in his car.

The stress, the smell- all of it combined became disconcerting to the point where he wasn't sure he was going to be able to drive; the memories of the attack and just how *badly* Billy had been injured kept surfacing to the forefront of his mind. His own arm was beginning to throb, the wound pulsating under the bandages and around the stitches again. He didn't realize he was clutching the steering wheel so tightly until he released it, immediately easing the pressure that had built up in his arm. Shaking himself out of his slight crisis, he looked into the rearview mirror and saw that Hopper was in the cab of his truck, ready and waiting to follow him.

He turned the radio on and kept the volume low before putting his car into gear, driving it away from the towing lot and towards the place the party had been held.

All the while he was driving- all the while with the *stench* of Billy's dried blood plugging his nostrils- the only thing he could think about was, surprisingly, his bat. Not of his father's wrath when he'd finally have to show him the car, or of his mother's concern when she saw his injuries, or even of the lies he'd have to concoct in order to placate them both- but his bat.

It was the third time it'd had been used to save a life- be it his own or his friends'- , and like hell if he was going to just *leave* it out there to rot or be collected and shelved as police evidence when he might still have need for it. He wanted it back in his possession; felt lesser without it. After all, it was the only reason he'd been asked to help with the crazy monster bullshit that had happened the last time something monstrous had spawned in Hawkins.

As they pulled up alongside Billy's camaro, thankfully still parked on the side of the road where it had been abandoned the night before, he thought about what he could say to let Hopper go with him back into the woods to retrieve what was his.

The body of Hopper's truck swayed on its frame as he put it into park, and Steve followed suit, cutting his engine as the chief got out and gave Billy's car a cursory examination, looking in through the windows to make sure it hadn't been ransacked by looters overnight. Steve's fingers gripped the steering wheel tightly again for a moment before he stepped out of his car to speak with him.

"Point me where to go and you're home-free, kid," Hopper said, looking over the hood of Billy's car towards the forest line that didn't seem nearly so intimidating in the daylight than it had when Steve had peered into its depths last. He couldn't help but feel that the calm tranquility it emitted now was a lie; he *knew* it harbored secrets it did not want to share, and monsters it didn't want found.

But it was stupid to think that the forest could take sides like that. It was a neutral force that just happened to be the place where whoever-the-fuck was trying to start shit.

"Well, uh, see, it's not really a straight shot," Steve said, shaking himself from his thoughts as he closed his car door and adjusted the way the coat's sleeves were rolled back. It was cold, and too much of his forearms were exposed. "You can get real turned around in there if you don't know where you're going."

"And you do?" Hopper couldn't help but scoff, turning towards him with a bemused expression on his face. "Look, if there's something to be found in there, then I'll find it. Trust me. You can go home, I'm letting you off the hook."

And Steve *did* want to go home, but he wasn't sure if he'd be able to handle a night alone without the protective assurances of his bat. Billy's words from the night before replayed themselves in his mind: *'Let's say it is following you- you go home and, what, it just magically loses your trail? You don't think it'd just follow you back?'* If he went home without it, he would surely lose his mind by just imagining the creature lurking around in the constructed shadows provided by the

tree line around his house.

"It's fine," he said, shrugging casually in an attempt to appear indifferent. "I'll lead you out to where it happened then leave you to it. Get out of your hair, or whatever. I left something out there I want to get back, anyway."

"What's that?" Hopper asked, stepping back from Billy's Camaro as Steve walked by him, leading the way to the path that they'd followed to start their trek into the woods.

"My bat," Steve said over his shoulder, ignoring the pink splotches in the snow that had been left behind during their frantic escape.

They followed the trail of blood that had, thankfully, not yet been snowed over; the splatterings of blood serving as a better guide than Steve was currently being. He trailed a few feet behind Hopper, turning his head this and way and that as he surveyed the area, waiting to catch a glimpse of whatever was living out there. Everything about the forest looked the same even though he'd only ever been through the area at night, but despite that, he felt as though he wasn't in the same patch of woods he'd been in before. Everything may have looked the same, but nothing else was.

There were *sounds*, first of all; sounds of wildlife that had been mysteriously absent the night of the attack- not that the forest had been particularly lively that time of night, but there were still expected sounds of nightlife that hadn't been present. During his walk-through with Billy, it had felt like they'd wandered into an uninhabitable bit of land, but now it was *thriving*. Birds were chirping, singing bright, energetic songs while other small rodents made their presence known through their chittering and scurrying, claws scraping against tree bark as they ran up their trunks. Even the wind blowing through the evergreen tree branches created gentle, calming noises as the branches rustled against one another lightly. If not for the blood, Steve would have sworn they were in the wrong place.

But the blood stains were still there, even if all the other ominous warnings and dreadful wrongness of the forest had dispersed. Whether or not that made the forest currently safe for them to be in

was unknown to him, but he was calmer knowing that the set-up was at least different. If the creature that had been stalking him was planning on ambushing him again, he'd at least be able to recognize the signs of warning before it happened. With that less-than-comforting thought in mind, they kept walking, feet crunching through the hardened snow as they slowly plodded along, acting as though they were taking a leisurely stroll the woods instead of conducting an actual investigation. Soon enough, Steve saw his first landmark: the place where he and Billy had stumbled upon the dismembered arm.

The snow was disturbed around the dried pool of blood, but the arm was no longer where it had been. He stopped walking, his stomach sinking as he stared at the vacancy with confusion.

"What's up?" Hopper asked, turning around when he heard that Steve had come to a standstill behind him. He glanced at the place Steve was staring at, but didn't see anything that stood out to him besides the blood; didn't understand the location's importance.

"There was- last night, we found an arm there." Steve pointed at the place it should have been, remembering how the fingers had begun to turn blue from the cold when they'd found it; how it had been frozen, stuck clawing at the sky. Hopper frowned. "I guess whatever it was came back for it," Steve said, throat dry.

Hopper stepped forward and crouched low to the ground, inspecting the disturbed snow and the large collection of dark blood around it. He wasn't a tracker by any means, but being the chief of police for a small hick town meant he had to have some knowledge about animal tracks. A lot of the time he got it wrong and made amateur mistakes (he *still* wasn't quite able to discern the difference between fox and coyote prints), but even he could see that the tracks he was looking at weren't man made- or made by any animal that could possibly live in the area. They were huge, indicating that the animal itself probably stood taller than he did. Nothing that big was native to the Indiana area.

Steve was watching him as he awkwardly shuffled forward in order to get a closer look at the long, dragging prints that had frozen into the snow. Five toes existed in a line, sloping down at an angle that

looked almost human, if not for the fact that they were absurdly long. Beyond that, though, he couldn't pick up on any other resemblances, as the toes were the only part of the print that were clearly defined; the rest of it beyond the mid and hind-foot were lost to the weird, shuffling gait the creature used to walk.

"Can you tell what it was?" Steve asked, hovering behind him. There was a hint of hopefulness in his voice that Hopper unfortunately had to quash.

"Let's just keep moving," he said, knees groaning as he used a nearby tree for support as he stood back up.

Mute with disappointment, Steve continued to follow after Hopper, who was now relying on the deep-cut grooves left in the snow that the creature had made when it abducted Billy and ran with him to the clearing. The blood was too sporadic here; spread and lost in larger quantities that didn't necessarily lead them in a straight line. Hopper whistled lowly at the sight- a somber sound that was out of place amongst the birds' constant cheering.

"No wonder kid almost died," he said upon taking his first step into the glen, not having meant to speak the thought aloud. Looking around the area, he saw the charred remains of a fire pit and followed the black scorch marks lining the surrounding tree bark with his eyes, up and up, impossibly high. "Musta been some fire."

Even some of the branches at the top of the canopy looked burnt and blackened, meaning the fire must have been, what, 20, 30 feet tall? When he took his eyes away, looking back to Steve to ask him about it, he found him on the other side of the fire pit staring down at something and walked over to join him.

The bat laid half submerged in the snow after hastily being tossed away, poking up from the drift at an angle where only the barrel could be seen. What to Hopper at first looked to be rust that had grown over the pointed ends of the nails was quickly realized to be blood, as it spread down the length of the handle to the grip. There were even small, torn bits of flesh that were still stuck on the sharpened bits of metal. As Steve went to pick it up, Hopper said, "Looks like you hit it pretty hard; it can't have gone far from here

with an injury like that. I'll call my deputies and have them search the area; with any luck, it's probably already bled out and died."

Steve let out a grim laugh and shook his head, gripping the handle of his bat tightly. His wound throbbed with the pressure he exerted, remembering the feeling of swinging the bat into the creature's ribs. How the bones had cracked, but then restored themselves almost immediately afterward. The weight of it in his hands was reassuring, and he looked upon it fondly, as though he were looking at a copy of his favourite movie or album instead of the lunatic weapon. Hopper shuddered, but couldn't say it was because of the cold.

"If it's well enough to have come back for that arm, then it's not dead yet," Steve said, turning his sad, brown eyes to Hopper forlornly.

Billy was released from the hospital two days later and resumed going to school that Wednesday, arm splinted, wrapped, and held in a sling. He looked terrible; exhausted by the strain of his injuries and the duration of his hospitalization. Dark rings hung low under his eyes, and the dark purple bruises that had encroached up his neck were taking on a diseased, sickly sort of yellow-green hue as they began to heal.

No one said anything about his injuries to his face, but people didn't spare Steve that same courtesy. Comparisons were made between the wounds on his and Billy's bodies, with considerations being taken to remind him of how similar they were and how they were each focused on the arm. Rumors quickly began circulating that they'd done it to each other in some sort of catastrophic fight that Steve had somehow, miraculously, won, which soured Billy's mood considerably. He stalked about the halls angrily, full of resentment despite the fact that Steve denied these details when presented with every chance he could.

But he never offered up any other explanation for what happened to them; wasn't sure how secretive he was supposed to be about it even though Hopper's investigation of the woods hadn't turned up anything substantial. They hadn't found the arm or the creature, and still had no idea what it was or if it was related to that dark other place they called the Upside Down. The fact that Billy hadn't said

anything about it yet either made him all the more reluctant to share the details about the supposed 'bear attack'. Steve chalked Billy's unwillingness to speak on the matter up to the immense amount of pain he must have been in, but he couldn't have known that it extended beyond that- that something else was taking priority in Billy's life.

In the dark, you can sense that something's following you. You can't see it, but you can *hear* it, masking its steps by walking in synchronized time with you, each footstep carefully being placed in sync with your own. You're not sure if it knows that *you* know it's there, and are honestly too afraid to turn around and see what the hell it is. It could be anything, and although it's being stealthy with its footfalls, its art of subtlety ends there.

It's growling. A low, humming sound that makes you think of someone impersonating a wolf more than it actually *being* a wolf. It sounds more human than animal, and the idea that someone is behind you, making noises like *that* , is enough to make your skin crawl. Are they back there, crawling behind you on all fours? Plunging their bare hands and feet into the cold snow to keep up the appearance of the animal they're trying to imitate?

If they are, you don't want to know, but you can't escape the thought now that you've pictured it- a pale, hairless, naked body lurching after you on their hands and feet, lips curled away from blunt and missing teeth as they keep up their growling, trying to ward you away from their territory.

You keep going forward, too afraid to turn around even though you've forgotten where it is you're trying to get to. Hell, you can't even remember *why* you're out here, alone and wandering through the darkened forest at night, dressed so poorly for the weather you're beginning to freeze. Your boots aren't thick enough to keep the chill from creeping into your toes, a burning sensation overtaking the tingling feeling they'd been exhibiting thus far. You hope it isn't frostbite.

Behind you, you can hear that the breathing of whoever it is behind you suddenly change. They stop growling for a moment, breath

hitching raggedly as they begin to pant. The sound of something rushing in the snow towards you has your heart banging in your chest, beating a desperate rhythm. You're afraid that it's going to ambush you, but you can't bring yourself to run away. Frozen in place, you stand still as the thing approaches you from behind, their hot breath suddenly on the back of your neck, the humidity that comes with it forcing your skin to bump up at the sensation. All your instincts are telling you to make a run for it, but your feet hurt too much, they're so cold.

The thing behind you isn't moving, just growling lowly in the back of its throat while it *breathes* on you, or smells you, or whatever the fuck it's doing. You're not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but if it hasn't attacked you yet then it's probably not going to anytime soon. You decide to keep walking, plowing forward steadily despite the fact that it feels like your feet are on *fire* . They've never hurt so bad, except once before when you were a child and idiotically went walking barefoot down the beach during midday in the summertime. The sand had been soaking up so much heat that it blistered the bottoms of both your feet. Your mother had had to take you to the hospital, upset that your father had given you permission to go alone, barefoot of all things.

Up ahead, vaguely in the distance, you can see a faint glimmer of light flickering through the spaces of the trees ahead of you. You want nothing more than to make a run for it, but you know better; it's too dark to see clearly, and it's likely that you'd just run into a tree in your haste. Fighting against the panic that's trying to consume you, you keep your legs going one at a time, slowly making progress towards what you recognize now to be a fire.

Soon you're able to hear voices, soft and low in the distance, and a spark of hope ignites in your chest. The thing that's been breathing down your neck backs off when you get closer to the gathering, and this time it doesn't bother disguising the sound of its feet stepping away from you.

With the thing's retreat, you decide to take your chances.

You run for it.

You're unable to tell if it's following you, as the sound of your heart beating and the sounds of the party ahead of you become too all-consuming. Is that the sound of *your* feet slapping in and out of the snow, or the creatures? Thin tree branches whip at your face, cutting thin lines into your face as you hurry past them to get to safety.

It feels as though you've been running for hours, sucking the painfully cold air into your lungs, painning your chest. A cramp wracks your side as you get closer, forcing you to slow down before you step into the clearing, a strong taste of blood rising up your throat. The bonfire ahead of you is roaring, flicking its sharp tongues up into the air and casting its brilliant warmth upon you. No one in the group assembled around the fire looks nearly as alarmed as they should be, but in a way you're kind of glad for that. If they're not afraid, then there's no reason for you to be, right? The fire is safe, and you are finally in its protective glow. Someone steps forward and takes your arm, guiding you forward and closer to the fire. Everyone at the party seems to be speaking at once with voices that tumble over one another, but they all seem to be saying the same thing: they're all so glad you're here. Real glad you could make it out here tonight, Billy.

Feeling safe now that you're by the fire, you feel brave enough to look over your shoulder at whatever it was you think was following you, half-convinced now that you'd hallucinated the whole thing. As your eyes adjust to peering into the looming gloom of the trees, at first you don't see anything, but then it appears to you all at once- a tall, dark, bulky shape that's staring at you with full, bright, completely white eyes. Your self-assured smile falls from your face as it suddenly moves, darting behind a tree and leaving your line of sight.

You turn around to ask if anyone else saw it too, only to find that you're alone. Everyone that had been there with you is gone, having left you alone by the fire that somehow has been reduced to nothing more than a small pile of a few dying embers.

You take a few steps back, fear surging through you again as you look about the clearing to try and find someone- *anyone*- to help you, when you hear it coming for you.

Hushed, quiet steps are approaching you from behind, rushing out of the woods towards you. Again your fear has rendered you immobile; left you too afraid to even turn and meet your fate as, out of the corner of your eyes, you see two monstrosly long and distorted hands slowly reaching out of the darkness to grab you.

And as you begin to scream, you still refuse to face it-

The scream that rose through his throat in the dream tapered off into a sharp gasp that brought him into wakefulness. Lying in bed, covered in fever-sweat, he panted and stared up at the ceiling, confused at first as to where he was, half-believing he was still in the hospital despite having been released days ago. Billy's chest heaved as he turned his head towards the wall, relief flooding through him when he realized he was only in his room, safe in the confines of his father's house. He felt the racing pace of his heart begin to calm as he closed his eyes, already forgetting most of the details of the nightmare, though the back of his neck still prickled with the remembered feeling of- what had it been?

He couldn't remember anymore.

When his heart had finally returned to a normal pace, he felt that he could probably fall back asleep. He allowed himself to relax, his arms draped across his stomach when the sounds of a tortured scream erupted from the living room. Billy's eyes shot open again as he sat up abruptly, groaning at the pain that flared in his arm with the motion. He waited for most of the pain to subside before standing up, the screams from the other room unrelenting in volume or agony.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he muttered bitterly before standing up and storming out of his bedroom.

Initially jumpy because of the faint after-feelings the nightmare had left him with, Billy was now only twitchy with anger. This wasn't the first time he'd caught Max watching one of those freaky horror movies she loved to watch at an unreasonable volume. He'd made sure to tell her the last time she'd pulled a stunt like this that he wasn't going to tolerate it anymore. Purposefully having left the implications of what he'd do to her if he caught her doing it again open to interpretation, the promised punishment had been enough to

keep her from doing it for a while, but she must have been feeling ballsy today, or certain he was knocked out from all the pills he'd been prescribed to take.

Lumbering into the living room, hair wild and eyes angry, he caught her sitting cross-legged on the floor, staring enraptured at the TV. The screaming continued as he approached her, practically having to shout to be heard over the movie as he began to demand, "What the *fuck* do you think you're-"

The words he'd meant to reprimand her with dried out and died on his tongue, his throat seizing up as he finally saw what the man in the movie was screaming about on the TV.

"What?" Max asked, reaching forward to hit the pause button on the VCR, freezing the movie on a gruesome scene.

The man from the movie was lying on the ground, body distorted in agony. His face was paused mid-scream, mouth stretched wide not from his vocalizations, but from the transformation he was undergoing. Lying on the floor, the man's body was taut and unnaturally long, covered in sparse hairs that hadn't been on his body before. The creature he was turning into looked alarmingly like the thing that had attacked him in the woods; so much so, that he could hardly comprehend what he was seeing.

She looked annoyed at having been interrupted, but the look on Billy's face turned her expression into more of a quizzical one. "What, Billy?"

"What the fuck are you watching?" he all but whispered, his eyes trained intensely on the frame she'd paused the movie on.

"*American Werewolf in London*'; why?" She spoke with a sneer, a slight smile curling up around the edges of her mouth as she interpreted the expression on his face to be one of fear. "You *scared*, Billy? Werewolf got your tongue?"

She couldn't have known just how right she was.

8. Knock Knock Knock

"He's doing it again."

There was a bitterness harbored in Nancy's voice that made Steve look up from the abysmal slop he'd been picking through on his food tray. The tenseness with which she squared her jaw made him frown, and he followed her stern gaze to where she held it, directed towards something over his shoulder.

Turning his head to see what she was referring to, Steve felt he already had a pretty good idea about what it was he was going to see, and, true enough, sitting three tables behind them sat Billy Hargrove and a group of his old friends. Instead of taking part in any of the conversations Tommy was trying to start, Billy was steadfastly ignoring him in favor of staring openly at Steve. Suppressing the slightest of shivers, Steve sighed and turned back around to his food with a resigned expression.

"Yep, he sure is," he said dryly. "Nothing I can do about it."

In the two weeks since the attack, Billy had gone through a series of shifts in demeanor when it came to interacting with Steve. When he'd first returned to school, he'd ignored him outright with a stubborn sense of determination, but his dismissal of him quickly flipped and turned into an obsession that was so prominent, people- or Nancy, at least- had begun to take notice. At any given time, if Billy happened to be in any relative proximity to Steve, he wouldn't be able to keep his eyes off of him, and although people had started to talk about it, their words did little to deter him.

Nothing stopped him from staring at Steve, and the attention was beginning to make his skin crawl.

But whatever it was Billy was doing, as long as it didn't get physical, Steve found he couldn't find the energy to care. He was still nursing his wounds, and had to worry about finding a job or something so he could pay his father back for ruining the BMW, and on top of *that* heap of responsibilities, there was the looming threat of finals, and while he was trying to manage all of those things as best he could,

the simple fact that they hadn't yet *found* the creature that attacked him weighed heavily on his mind.

He had nightmares about it; about it descending from the trees in a heap of vicious limbs that lashed out at him, cutting his flesh to the bone- nightmares where he hadn't acted fast enough to be able to prevent Billy from bleeding out and, and instead had to hold him in his arms while his blood ran out of him, leaving him pale and gasping as the snow turned crimson around them. Hell, he still had nightmares about the fucking *demodogs*, so if Billy wanted to stare at him, fine. He had more important things to worry about, though he did have to admit that he found Billy's behaviour odd.

Was he staring at him because he realized that Steve had literally saved his life and was now thinking of a way to repay him somehow? He could start by replacing the car seat he'd nearly bled to death in, if that was the case, so he could cross that worry off his list. Or was his interest in Steve fueled by something more sinister, like a desire to seek revenge for belittling him somehow, despite the fact that Steve had done his damndest to dispel any emasculating rumours that had surfaced after the incident? The last thing he wanted was for their bad blood to start flooding the school's hallways for everyone to slosh around in.

Nancy didn't bother lowering her voice when she spoke, and despite the general ambient tone of conversation that the lunchroom carried, Jonathan overheard what she'd said, and as he came to sit down beside her, setting his brown paper lunch bag onto their table, he looked at her for a confused moment before asking, "Who's doing what?"

He looked curiously between them as he began to unpack his lunch, setting a sandwich and a piece of fruit aside while Steve breathed out another sigh and tried to shrug off the eyes he could feel boring into his back.

"It's Billy," Nancy said when Steve declined to answer. "He's *staring* at Steve again."

Looking annoyed, Nancy let out a little huff and finally diverted her eyes away from where Billy was sitting to give Jonathan a small

smile in greeting. Despite his growing annoyance with the situation, Steve managed to find some amusement in the fact that Nancy was more bothered by Billy's behaviour than he was. It showed she still cared about him somewhat, and that was one of the few good things he felt he had left.

"Why do you think he's been doing that?" Jonathan asked as he unwrapped the plastic surrounding his sandwich. His sunken eyes looked across the lunchroom for a moment to get a look at their subject of conversation before focusing back on his tablemates.

"Who knows with that guy," Steve commented indifferently, shrugging as he stabbed a fork into the meaty portion of his meal. "As long as he stays the fuck away from me, I don't care what he does."

"Even if *you* don't care, I don't like it." Nancy's eyes flicked briefly back to where Billy was sitting before taking a bite of lunch. Beside her, Johnathan had grown silent, eating his food contemplatively. "It doesn't feel right. It's almost like he's planning some kind of revenge scheme."

"Well you'd think if he was angry with you he'd have done something about it by now," Jonathan said, directing his statement towards Steve as he swallowed down a bite of food. A small smear of mayo streaked across his upper lip. "So far he's shown himself to be the kind of guy who acts immediately on his feelings, you know?"

"Oh, believe me, I know," Steve replied, unable to keep the slow drawl of sarcasm out of his tone, memories of nearly being beaten to death surfacing in his mind. Despite his reluctance to credit Jonathan with a good idea, he knew that he was probably right. If Billy had some sort of beef with him, he'd definitely have taken it up with him before now.

Besides that, whenever Steve noticed him staring and returned the look, he never really thought that Billy looked *angry* with him. He looked more lost than anything. Confused, even. He never even seemed to realize that Steve was staring back.

"Well if he's not thinking of ways to kill you, then what is he doing?" Using a napkin, Nancy reached out and wiped away the mayo on

Jonathan's face, earning a timid smile from him in thanks. "He's been giving you weird looks all week."

"Hadn't noticed," Steve murmured sarcastically.

Nancy didn't appreciate the tone with which Steve spoke, but didn't press the issue beyond giving him a reproachful look. As their conversation died off, they ate in silence, offering Steve a chance to run through a mental list of who was hiring in the area, and what places he could reasonably send in an application, but having no prior experience with working, well, *anywhere*, left his options sorely limited. The places that *would* probably hire him were the places he had no desire to work at, but at the end of the day, what was it his dad was always telling him? 'Beggars can't be choosers'.

"The more I think about it," Jonathan said, stirring Steve from his thoughts, "the more I think it looks like he's trying to figure out how to approach you."

"What?" Steve shook his head in a way that he knew made his hair look good and laughed.

"What makes you think that?" Nancy asked.

Jonathan shrugged, looking down when Steve laughed. He picked at the crust on his sandwich as he spoke, peeling bits of brown bread away as he said, "The way he's been staring at Steve kind of reminds me of... me. Like, before I got to know you guys; back when I was on the outside looking in, sort of."

"Jonathan-" Nancy started, a sympathetic look creasing her brow.

The bell that signaled the end of their lunch period rang before anything more could be said. As they stood up and prepared to discard their trays and trash, Steve cast a look back to where Billy had been sitting. The boy was gone, though; lost in the transitional migration crowd as their peers began to make their way back to class.

Even if Steve wanted nothing more to do with him, he couldn't deny the fact that he'd been bonded to him in some regard when they'd both survived the 'bear' attack. If Billy had something to say to him,

he'd listen, sure, but Steve wasn't going to be the one to initiate *that* conversation.

They hadn't even spoken since Steve had last seen him at the hospital, and that particular conversation had been weird enough to the point where he'd decided to give Billy the widest social berth he possibly could.

Whatever Billy wanted to talk about, he'd have to come to Steve first.

Coming back to school hadn't been easy for Steve; his injuries were so incredibly less severe than Billy's that he hadn't needed to take time off, but he wished he'd been allowed to. His writing hand was constantly sore because of all the numerous stitches running up his arm, and with the amount of last minute note taking he'd been doing in preparations for finals, he was half-afraid he was going to pop a few open as a result, but at least returning so soon had given him the opportunity to pretend everything was normal, and the more time that passed that allowed him to think that, the more Steve was inclined to believe that it really *had* just been a bear.

A mange-ridden, rabid, larger-than-your-average bear, sure, but it was better than the alternative; it was better than the unknown.

Despite his feeble self-assurances that carried him through his school days, he couldn't deny that he held an absurd amount of trepidation when it came to the simple task of opening his locker.

The last thing he wanted was to ruin his fragile psyche by finding more notes stuffed into his locker. But as the days went by and he hadn't yet found another invitation, he allowed himself to grow comfortable in the thought that the whole ordeal was behind him, and would remain as nothing more than another traumatic memory he'd just have to learn to live with.

He could manage that much. Or at least, he hoped he could.

The note that fluttered out of his locker then as he opened it threw his newly reconstructed confidence to the breeze. Steve stared after the offending piece of paper as it fell to the floor, already feeling a

slight panic start to build up in his chest. The fear that the note had something to do with the woodland parties blinded him to the fact that this shred of paper was different from the invitations he'd received before.

Printed on fine cardstock that likely would have impressed a businessman like his father with its weight, the note that came fluttering from Steve's locker was the exact opposite of what he feared it was. This was a literal scrap of college-ruled paper, torn from a notebook and folded over itself lazily.

He turned away from the note lying on the floor and closed his locker quickly. He almost walked away without picking it up, and would have, too, if he hadn't caught Billy's eye at that precise moment.

Leaning against a row of lockers further down the hall, Billy was watching him, giving Steve reason to pause. Imperceptibly, Billy broke the stare between them and nodded once to the note Steve had left on the ground. 'Pick it up', he seemed to say.

Steve squinted at him, unsure of what his motives were. Driven by curiosity, he turned back to where he'd left the note and hesitantly bent down to grab it. Relief replaced that slight feeling of panic when he realized that the note wasn't like the invitations he'd received in the past. He turned back to Billy, only to find that he'd moved on. Crinkling the piece of paper in his fist briefly, Steve stepped back to his locker and unfolded the note.

'I need to show you something.

Meet me in the parking lot.'

Despite the fact that it hadn't been signed by anyone, the note had undoubtedly been written by Billy. Anybody else would have just asked to speak with him in person.

Tucking the note into his jeans pocket, Steve sighed miserably as he made his way through the hall, an uneasy feeling about the direction his afternoon was taking settling into his gut.

That feeling was improved upon when he finally stepped outside and

saw just how gloomy it was. Wet, half-frozen snowflakes were falling from an overcast sky, creating an uncomfortable slush he had to trudge through to get to the student parking lot. Wind was blowing weakly, occasionally throwing a soggy flurry into his face that he had to wipe away in order to see.

People were peeling out of the lot as quickly as they could, desperate to escape the hideous weather conditions and get somewhere warm. His fingers played with the note in his pocket as he strode through the second-hand mush of winter and made his way to where Billy stood, leaning up against his car feigning nonchalance despite the fact that Steve could see him visibly shivering.

Because of his injury, Billy had taken to wearing his coat half on, half off. The brace that he'd been outfitted with to keep his broken arm in place wouldn't fit in the tight leather sleeve of what must have been his only winter coat. *A smarter man would've dressed in layers*, Steve thought, and then grinned a little because he himself had dressed in layers. *Dress smarter, not harder*.

"Wanna tell me what this is about?" he asked as he approached Billy, holding the folded note up for him to see.

"Thought I was being pretty clear when I wrote it."

Billy obviously wasn't in the mood for their typical banter, but Steve wasn't in the mood for being serious. He'd been stewing in serious thoughts all day, and if Billy was going to give him an opening to be an ass, then he was going to take it.

"Well, I mean, this could mean any number of things," he said, opening the note to read it aloud. Billy' looked away with a scowl. "I've only ever gotten notes like these from girls, you know."

"Christ, cut the shit Harrington," Billy said, rolling his eyes. He made to stand up, but was pushed back against the Camaro, a look of surprise overtaking his features as he felt Steve's hand wind itself into his jacket.

"No, *you* cut the shit, Hargrove!" Steve snapped, his pent-up frustrations boiling over. "You've been staring at me all week like a

girl with a crush on me, and now you send me *this*? What is it you've got to show me? Your fucking dick or some shit? Because believe me pal, I am *not* interested in whatever kind of fucked up confession this is."

After his outburst, both boys went quiet, each of them stunned into silence after Steve's sudden eruption. Around them, the parking lot was nearly empty, mercifully allowing them a privacy neither of them had thought they'd need to have this conversation.

Realizing he'd had the lapels of Billy's jacket bunched into his hands, he let Billy go and took a step back, running his hand that wasn't wrapped in bandages through his hair.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered to himself, then turned back to Billy, who had yet to say anything. "Well?" Steve snapped. "You got something you need to show me or not?"

A mirthful smile spread across Billy's face when he spoke, a mischievous spark lighting his eye. "Yeah, I do, but it's at my house. Get what I'm saying, Harrington? I'm asking you to come home with me, *stud*."

Steve stared at him blankly for a moment before breaking away to laugh, sucking in frigid air and snowflakes that melted in his throat. Billy shrugged his jacket back into place, covering his injured arm from the cold.

"You're a real piece of shit, Hargrove," Steve finally said, shaking his head. "Alright, fine. I'll 'come home with you', or whatever, but I swear, if you *actually* whip your dick out when we get there I'll fucking kill you."

"Relax, asshole, I'm not asking you over for a fucking conjugal visit," Billy drawled, rolling his eyes again. Steve waited for him to elaborate more about what the nature of the visit actually was, but Billy had evidently said all he was going to about the matter.

"You want me to follow you then?" he asked, gesturing towards where his car was parked a few rows over.

"Try to keep up," Billy replied, smirking a little bit as he rounded the front of the Camaro to the driver's side, whereupon he opened the door and slid awkwardly into the seat.

"Don't you have to wait for Max?" Steve asked, speaking loudly as Billy started his car, but he never heard the reply if there was one. Billy began reversing almost immediately, intent on driving out of the lot as fast as he could to make Steve work for it. Breathing out a hasty "Oh, shit," Steve started jogging towards his car so he wouldn't fall too far behind.

Compared to Harrington's house, Billy knew that his own had no way of stacking up against it. Hell, Steve's house had a *pool* and Billy's didn't even have a second fucking floor. Everyone that lived in Neil Hargrove's house all lived together on the same miserable floor, cramped together by circumstance, and even though Tommy had cast his friendship with Steve aside, that didn't stop him from talking up how *awesome* the fucking Harrington house was.

It was one of those things he'd had to punch him out for.

All that aside, Billy honestly didn't give a shit about the state of his house; it didn't reflect him or his worth- only his father's, for he had been the one to settle for the shit-heap. Not everyone could be born into their wealth.

Regardless, he averted his eyes away when Steve's eyes wandered up the front of his home, taking stock in its size and the rundown condition it was in after he pulled into the driveway. He didn't comment on the miserable way it sat on its foundation as he stepped out of the car, or of how grimy the windows were as he walked with Billy up the front porch steps, and even stayed quiet when the wooden boards squeaked and groaned with their weight.

As they stepped through the front door, Billy finally had to address the queer feeling he'd been harboring in his stomach as nervousness. Steve looked around their tiny living room, but refrained from saying anything about its size. But oh, how he must have wanted to; Billy could see it written all over his pretty face. The rich fuck wanted to brag about how much better his own house was, he could *feel it*-

"Nice set up," Steve said instead, gesturing to where Billy had his work-out equipment set out.

Whether he was being sincere or not, Billy couldn't say, but the compliment had done enough to derail his spiraling train of thought.

"Gets the job done," he replied casually, taking his coat off and throwing it over his workout bench.

"I'll say."

"What?"

"You said you had something to show me?" Steve said, frowning a little at the look on Billy's face. "Please don't tell me you took me all the way out here just to fuck with me."

"Who's fucking with who?" Billy said with a hint of a snarl curling his lip. He had to remind himself that he had been the one to initiate this gathering, and had to bite back on some of the anger that had surfaced out of nowhere. Steve didn't say anything in response, allowing Billy time to simmer down enough to point at his TV. "Turn that on."

"You bring me to *your* house so I can turn *your* TV on for you?" Steve scoffed, but Billy looked serious. "Fuck you," he said as he stepped across the living room from where he was standing to kneel down and press the power button.

The screen flickered for a moment, struggling to stabilize as the black screen turned grey before sputtering to life, the colour image slowly beginning to materialize on the screen. Steve took a few steps back as he waited for it to come into clarity, not noticing the way Billy had averted his eyes away from the TV. His gaze was, once again, fixed solely on Steve, waiting to catch and gauge his reaction from what he was about to see.

Billy had rented the VHS tape of 'American Werewolf in London' from the store after Max had returned it, intent on showing the creature on the film to Steve, but unsure of *how* he was going to accomplish that. They weren't friends, or even anything remotely close to that, but

ever since he'd seen it he'd known he'd have to clue him in on what he'd found out eventually. That, and he had more than just the movie to show him.

As the movie scene that Billy had paused the tape on finally came to light, he felt his injured arm itch, and longed to scratch it.

"What the hell is this," Steve finally said after a moment.

His eyes had grown wide at the sight at the tormented figure of David lying on the floor, face contorted in pain as he was caught in the throes of mid transformation. It was all the affirmation that Billy needed to know that he'd been right.

"Look familiar?" Billy asked, running his tongue along his teeth.

Steve stared at the creature for a second longer before shaking his head. When he turned to Billy, his face no longer looked frightened, but angry.

"No, really, what the fuck is that?" His tone was accusatory, and he was speaking so loudly he might as well have been yelling. "If this is your idea of some kinda fucking joke-

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Billy snapped back, brow creasing as Steve went into denial. "I figured it out, asshole! The thing that got us in the woods- that *thing* that nearly ripped my fucking arm off- that's it! Right there on that fucking screen!"

Steve turned away from him to stare at the screen again, eyes running over the details presented to him. It did look remarkably like the creature he'd grown content to believe was a bear: the sparse patches of hair, the elongated canine jaw, and the harrowingly thin frame that carried it all left little to no doubt in his mind that this *was* it. Whatever 'it' was.

"How did you-" His throat had gone dry with the realization. Steve had to wet his lips before he could speak again. "How did you find this?"

Billy looked at him contemplatively, as one might watch a dog that has tried to bite them in the past but still wanted to pet it. "The rental

place by the arcade. It's a movie; Max was watching it."

"A movie?" Steve balked. "So you're saying we were assaulted by a *movie monster*?"

"A werewolf," Billy said decisively.

The unease Steve had felt building up inside him seemed to vanish in an instant. His body wanted to shake with relief, but he wouldn't let it.

"Holy shit," he said, combing a hand through his hair, stifling a nervous laugh. He took a few steps to the side, pacing in front of the TV. "This is unbelievable."

Billy regarded his shift in demeanor calmly, but with a frown. He reached into the back pocket of his pants and grabbed his pack of cigarettes and pulled one out, setting it to his lips and then lighting it.

"I mean, do you hear yourself? A *werewolf*? C'mon, man," Steve continued, finally coming to a stop in front of Billy. He shook his head and uttered out another short laugh. "I really thought you were onto something here for a minute, you know? Werewolves aren't *real*. What did you expect me to do after showing me this? You want me to call Hopper up? Tell him that what he's been looking for all this time is a goddamn movie monster?!"

"Well what's your theory then?" Billy finally replied, sneering around his cigarette, his anger smoldering beneath his skin like the burning end of his cigarette. "If it looks like a werewolf, acts like a werewolf, then fuck, what the hell else could it be?!"

"A bear!" Steve shouted, throwing his arms up in frustration. "Werewolves don't exist, dipshit!"

"Then how do you explain my arm?!" Billy hollered, throwing his cigarette to the floor. He stomped it out angrily before he lifted his injured arm up, struggling to pull the sling up and over his head. Alarmed at the action, Steve stepped in to try and stop him but was roughly shoved away. "If it's not some kind of supernatural piece of

shit, then how do you explain your *hand*?" he hissed, throwing the sling to the floor beside the crumpled filter of his wasted cigarette.

"What about my hand?" Steve asked, speaking levelly as he watched Billy's fingers fumble with the brace, managing to all but tear it free from his arm to drop it to the ground alongside the sling. "Are you fucking insane, Hargrove? What the hell are you doing, man, your arm-"

"My arm is *fine*."

Billy spoke curtly, practically cutting his own sentence short in his haste to show off what he meant. He peeled the bandages that had been wrapped around his arm away with hasty, scratching motions, and then held his arm up for Steve to see it. Where there should have been sections of stripped off flesh and bruises marking where his arm had been broken, there was instead... nothing. Astonished, Steve saw that there was not a single scratch left on his tanned skin. The mutilation he'd endured was gone.

As if that wasn't evidence enough to prove something supernatural was behind his miraculous recovery, Billy stepped towards his workout station and grabbed up one of his heaviest hand weights. Without so much as a grunt of effort or slight whine of pain, he curled it effortlessly in his arm, ultimately proving that his bones were no longer broken. Steve watched his display with wide eyes, mouth dropping open in confusion, because he'd known for a *fact* that Billy's injuries had been substantially worse than his own, and to see that his arm was totally healed now was baffling. His own arm still had all of the stitches in it, and throbbed painfully sometimes when he wrote with it for too long.

"Your arm was broken-" he stuttered, unable to fully put words behind his thoughts.

"Yeah. In three places," Billy said morosely, as though he were upset by the fact that it now seemed to be intact and unbroken.

"But then... What the fuck..." Steve whispered, reaching out to touch Billy's bicep to feel for himself if what he was seeing was true. The contact was short lived, as Billy immediately flinched away from his

touch with a disgusted look plastered all over his face.

"My hand," Steve said flatly, pulling away without a fuss. "You keep saying it's all fucked up, but I don't see it. What the hell's so wrong with it?"

"No *one* else sees it- not just you; I've been watching people talk to you like it's *normal* all goddamn week."

"Tell me what you see, then."

Steve waited patiently, giving Billy enough time to put his thoughts in order. He'd been riled up before, and looked to be struggling with how to best describe what it was he was seeing that no one else could, his eyes focused entirely on Steve's hand.

"It looks diseased," Billy finally said after a moment. "There're these... puncture marks in it that just- look infected."

"Infected," Steve repeated, looking over his hand curiously, turning it forward and back. To him, it still looked fine.

"And it smells, too, like... " Billy sniffed and then immediately wrinkled his nose in disgust. "It smells like the air did that night. Rotten."

"It didn't bite me, though," Steve said, frowning. "My hand wasn't hurt at all."

"No," Billy said quietly. "It didn't, but whatever you saw at that bonfire did."

A chill made the small hairs on his body stand upright as Steve was forced to remember the disembodied wolfs head, picturing it in his mind with vivid clarity. He remembered its teeth sinking into his flesh, poking holes into his skin that had vanished the instant he'd thrown it away in shock. No one had believed him then, but the look on Billy's face said he was willing to believe him now, but Steve wasn't sure if he himself actually believed it anymore.

Along with his willingness to write the creature they'd encountered in the woods off as a bear, Steve had written off his experience with the

wolf head as just a bad trip, and now Billy was trying to turn it into something else, forcing him to re-examine the trauma as though it was something that had *actually* happened.

"You can see where it bit me?" Steve asked, speaking slowly and with an air of trepidation. "And you're saying that, what, it's infected now?"

Billy didn't reply right away. There was a strange look on his face as he studied Steve for a moment, his eyes trained on the hand he claimed was injured.

"I wanna try something," he said at last, stepping past Steve and into the narrow hallway that lead to the other rooms tucked away in his house.

Steve followed after him, glancing once back at the image displayed on the screen, wondering if perhaps the idea of a werewolf existing in Hawkins wasn't as far-fetched as he initially thought it was. Walking down the short hallway to where Billy had slipped into the bathroom he shared with Max, Steve took a glance into what could have only been Billy's bedroom.

Beyond it being small, (much, *much* smaller than even the guest bedroom in his own home), it looked just like what a person might think Billy Hargrove's bedroom *would* look like. Hot women, a vanity station, and a stereo to blare his music was all a man like Billy could ever need.

"Here," Billy said, stealing Steve's attention away. "Let me see your hand."

"Why?" Steve asked hesitantly, holding his hand warily away from where Billy was holding out his own to take it.

"What are you, a fucking child? Just give it here," Billy said impatiently.

Groaning mentally, Steve relinquished his hand. Billy gripped him tightly around the wrist, pulling a face as he drew his hand closer towards him.

"What're you doing-"

"Just hold still."

With his other hand, Billy held a clean ball of cotton and slowly moved it towards Steve's hand, his face pinching up in disgust as he finally rubbed the ball against his skin.

"That hurt you any?" Billy asked as he released his grip over Steve's hand, switching his focus from Steve's skin to the cotton ball he'd just swabbed over it.

"N...no?"

Billy grunted lowly, furrowing his brows as he held the cotton ball up for Steve to see it. "What about this? See anything on this?"

And to his horror, Steve found that he could.

The little ball of cotton had been clean when Billy plucked it out of the package. Steve had seen that, and yet, as he stared at the gruesome mixture of pus and blood on the side Billy had used as a swab, he couldn't help but think for just a second that perhaps it had come like that. No way had that awful mixture actually come from him. The fibers of the ball were stained yellow and bright red, indicating that whatever it was that Billy was able to see on his hand was an open wound. A gruesome, open wound.

"What the hell?" he uttered, mortified by the sight of the cotton ball. He rubbed his hand over the patch of skin Billy had swabbed, but nothing came up on his fingers when he pulled them away. He ignored the way his hands had begun to shake as he inspected the back of his hand uncomprehendingly.

"You see this," Billy said, gesturing to the stained cotton ball, "but you still can't see it on you?" Steve didn't bother replying. "Fuck. Fine, alright, let me see it again."

"Why?" Steve asked, looking over his hands again and again, trying desperately to see what Billy saw and could, evidently, interact with.

"Gotta clean it out." Steve paused with his examination and looked up

at Billy who'd gone back to rifling through the things he kept stored behind the sink mirror, sure he'd misheard him. When Billy caught the look of disbelief in Steve's eye he paused, placing a bottle of antiseptic on the rim of the sink. "I know *you* can't smell it, but I can and it fucking *stinks*. I can't fucking stand it anymore. If I clean it out, maybe it'll be less, I dunno, *putrid*."

"I mean, maybe?" Steve could admit that he had no idea if it would make a difference or not, but Billy's logic was sound. "If it'll get you to stop staring at me, have at it, I guess."

Even though Steve knew from experience that nothing Billy did to the wound would physically hurt him, he found himself recoiling out of habit when he poured the antiseptic over the back of his hand. Billy arched a brow at the reaction, but held Steve's hand firmly over the sink as the liquid flowed over his skin. It didn't run off clear.

The tainted antiseptic left murky, bloody streaks that trailed into the basin of the sink as it found its way to the drain. As the bodily fluids left whatever invisible plane they existed on, Steve thought he could catch a faint whiff of whatever smell Billy had been complaining about. A scent of what could have been construed as rotting flesh or a dead animal had begun to take up the small space of the bathroom they stood in, causing him to grimace as Billy began to clean out the wound in earnest. He would have said something witty about how focused Billy appeared to be, using q-tips and cotton swabs to clean out the hidden wound, if not for the strange situation they had both found themselves in.

Instead he watched him quietly, and found himself admiring the way Billy became lost with what he was doing when he decided to really put his mind into behind his work. It was a side of him that Steve had never seen before, and against his better judgement, he found the way Billy furrowed his brow in a way that it wrinkled his forehead kind of... endearing. When he wasn't full of adrenaline and anger, Billy almost came across as personable.

Almost.

"Now who's staring at who?" Steve heard Billy drawl, and he had to blink a few times to draw himself out of his semi-trance.

"Please, don't flatter yourself; I wasn't staring at *you*," he replied defensively, watching as Billy turned his hand from side to side to make sure he'd gotten all the gunk out of the puncture wounds only he could see. "I was clearly mesmerized by all this shit coming out of my hand."

Billy scoffed, but let the issue drop. Instead of offering up a retort, he said, "You probably need stitches."

This time Steve did yank his hand away from him, pulling it away so quickly it thumped into his chest with a dull thud.

"What the hell Harrington-"

"I am *not* about to let you put stitches into the imaginary holes in my hand!" He didn't mean to sound so whiny about it, but he couldn't help the way his voice lilted in distress.

"I didn't say I was going to," Billy snapped, his calm demeanor turning into irritation. He cast away the soiled materials he'd been working with in the small bathroom trash can and pushed past Steve into the hallway. "I only said that you *probably* needed them."

"Yeah, well, what the hell do you know," Steve said, following after him.

Steve continued to hold his hand against his chest as Billy moved into his bedroom. He stepped into the doorway and watched as he made his way to the small, self-constructed vanity and began to rifle through a box of his belongings. Unsure of what it was Billy was looking for, Steve took the time to gaze around his room, eyeing up whatever he could and mentally storing away things he could use to discredit him in future arguments.

"Here," Billy said after a moment, pulling out what looked like a small, self-made first aid kit out of a hidden box. "Gimme your hand again."

"What for?" Steve asked, eyeing the box warily.

"To fucking amputate it, idiot; just give it here." Billy held out his hand expectantly, and rather reluctantly, Steve once again trusted

him with the care of his hand.

In the small, inconspicuous first aid kit was an assortment of bandages, gauze, and adhesive tape. Steve didn't ask why he had it; only watched quietly as Billy took out a box of butterfly bandages and began applying them to where the holes in the back of his hand must have been. It looked odd to Steve to see his perfectly fine skin get bunched up underneath the thin, white bandages, but if this was what it took to get rid of the mark (and he was sure, suddenly that it *was* a marking of sorts), then he'd allow it.

"God, that's gross," Billy mumbled, scrunching his face up before wrapping Steve's hand in the medical tape until the bandages were covered and hidden.

"Gee, thanks," Steve said, examining Billy's handiwork when he was done. He hated to admit it, but he'd done a pretty good job dressing his hand for him.

They stood in the door-frame of Billy's bedroom for a long moment afterwards, neither one of them speaking. The weight of their discovery weighed heavily on each of their minds as they individually wondered about what they ought to do with the information going forward.

"So, I guess I'll tell Hopper-"

"We need to talk about-"

Steve laughed when they spoke at the same time, but Billy only scowled.

"Get the hell out of my room," he said crossly, pushing Steve out of the doorway and into the hall. "I need to show you the rest of that fucking movie."

Steve didn't like the movie. He'd never been a fan of the horror genre- couldn't understand why anyone would be, really-, but the werewolf movie Billy was forcing him to sit through was so violent it was beginning to make his stomach turn.

Worse than the violence, though, was that he had to watch a large portion of the film alone. Not that he was *scared* to watch it alone, but he definitely would've preferred not to have to watch it by himself in a stranger's home. In order to keep up appearances, Billy had left him to re-dress his arm once he'd rewound the movie to a suitable starting point. Steve understood that he couldn't just walk around town with his arm the way it was, but even still, he didn't appreciate having to sit through the horrific movie alone at his insistence.

"Why the hell did you make me watch that," Steve complained once the movie had ended.

Billy had come in around the halfway mark, his arm freshly bandaged and back in its sling. He'd caught Steve cowering on the couch, watching the gorey parts behind the selective censorship of his fingers, and of *course* he'd laughed at him. He'd taken a seat on his workout bench, leaning against the dumbbell supports and *laughed* at him for a good five minutes, but at least that instant of humiliation had taken the edge off of the worst of it. Steve had been able to watch the rest of the movie without issue, but he knew he was never going to be able to live that down.

Now that the movie was over, Billy didn't look quite as amused anymore. He was watching the end credits slowly scroll up the screen with a somber, dissociated look. Unsure if he'd heard him or not, Steve was about to repeat himself when Billy finally spoke.

"To make sure you understood what's coming." Confused, Steve could only look at him uncomprehendingly. With a groan, Billy sat up from his hunched over position and turned his eyes away from the screen. "I guess you didn't get to being the 'King' of the hick capital of the world by being smart. Did you pay attention to the movie at all?"

"It *was* a werewolf, Harrington; even you can't deny that now, and you *saw* what happened to that guy who got bit by one, or did you miss that while you were watching the movie through your fingers?"

"Shut the fuck up," Steve muttered in embarrassment. "It was one part; I watched every other second of the damn movie!"

"Then work it out for me, pretty boy; exercise that tiny little brain of yours for once and show me you're better than all the rest of these inbred Hawkins idiots."

Steve opened his mouth to argue, but saw that Billy wasn't actually trying to initiate an argument. Instead, he was trying to reason with him. He hadn't forced him to watch the movie for his own entertainment, but was instead trying to *show* him something. There was something obvious Steve was failing to see here, and Billy was trying to open his eyes to it.

Mentally, he recounted everything he could that related to their situation. The bonfire, the attack, the recovery, his conversations earlier that day, the bite on his hand-

The bite.

"It- it didn't bite me," Steve finally said, his eyes going wide in realization as he recalled the conversation they'd shared not two hours ago. Billy's face lit up as Steve's succumbed to the horror the movie had exposed him to. "It didn't bite me, it bit *you*, so then, you-that makes you-"

Billy grinned at him sardonically, revealing his teeth.

"Guess I really am a monster now."

9. Buried in Water

'Liminal' was not a word that existed within Steve's lexicon, but even so, it was the word that best fit how he felt sitting there in Billy Hargrove's curiously empty home, watching him pace the floor in front of him. He was talking, speaking energetically, but Steve wasn't listening; he was finding it hard to focus, too distracted by the revelation of werewolves to actually comprehend what he was being told. It was like his brain had gone numb, blanketing his mind in indifference as he studied the bandages covering the invisible wounds over his hand.

"I don't know anyone in this hick town, so I'm going to need you to-"

A monster, Billy had said. Another goddamned monster running around loose in Hawkins, terrorizing the youth because why the hell not? They might as well change the slogan of the towns 'now entering' sign to read, 'Welcome to Hawkins: Monster Capital of the U-nited States'.

Billy kept talking, but his words continued to fall on selectively deafened ears as Steve wondered about who he ought to tell. Who the hell would even believe him? The kids, probably; Dustin definitely. But would they be enough to help him? And then, what were they meant to help him *with*? Exterminating Billy Hargrove? While he was certain they'd jump to arms for a chance to eradicate him, this wasn't a monster problem he felt could be solved by bludgeoning it to death like the last two had.

"I don't know anything about this shit, but, I think that'll be enough."

"What-" Steve spoke slowly, brow furrowed as he tried to bring himself out of the introspective daze he'd worked himself into. He shook his head a little bit and ran a hand through his hair. "Sorry, what'd you say?"

Billy had stopped pacing and was waiting to hear the feedback on whatever idea he'd come up with in the time that Steve had been spacing out. A cigarette was hanging limply out of his mouth, smoke filtering through his lips. "Have you not been listening to a

goddamned thing I've been saying?" he growled, frowning sharply when he realized Steve really hadn't. "Before we do *anything*, I said we need proof."

"Proof...? Proof of what?"

"Holy shit, what the hell are you being so damn spacey for?"

"I *said* I don't know anything about werewolves except for what that b-movie showed me, and even then, how much of *that* is based on fact? It's just a fucking movie. Maybe this healing of my arm is enough proof that it *was* something supernatural, but what if that's just like, I don't know, a side-effect of being bitten?" He began pacing again, rambling as he walked back and forth in front of the small couch Steve was sitting uncomfortably on. He smoked the cigarette down to the filter but kept sucking on the butt end, focused entirely on finishing his thought. "Maybe it ends there, and I'm not actually infected or cursed or whatever. Maybe this is all that'll happen with me, but maybe there'll be more. I don't know *anything* about this, and from the look on your face you know about as much as I do, which is jack shit."

"So, research," Steve said. The idea that he was sitting in on a lecture made him want to laugh; no wonder he'd spaced out so hard earlier. "You want to do research? Go down to the library and have ourselves a good old fashioned study session?"

"Fuck research," Billy said decisively, snarling at Steve's retort. "You can do all the research in the world and *still* have people who don't buy into it. Fuck that. I don't want research, I want *proof*. Hard proof. Evidence that can't be refuted."

"Your arm-"

"-isn't proof enough for me," Billy finished, coming to a standstill and glowering at Steve. "And won't be for anyone else who didn't see it before, Jesus, Harrington, you really aren't a good learner, are you?"

"For a guy who was trying so damn hard to get *me* to believe in all this, you're being awful stubborn when it comes to your own convictions," Steve snapped. "So what, then? What'll be enough?"

Billy studied him quietly, a smoldering expression of pent up exasperation clouding his features. He didn't speak right away, causing Steve to want to fidget under the scrutiny, but he remained still.

"That," Billy finally said, pointing to the TV behind him where they'd paused the movie again on the transformation scene to study and compare the beast. "That'll be enough. When the next full moon comes, then I'll be satisfied."

Of course he was right. There was only one definitive way to settle the question of whether or not Billy actually was a werewolf now, and that meant waiting to see if he transformed under the influence of a full moon. Initially the idea of that seemed ridiculous to Steve, but when he thought about it, he wasn't sure why that notion should be ridiculous to him at all- he'd definitely seen stranger things. If horrific flower-faced monsters that were born out of the depths of some alternate universe could exist and somehow crawl their way into a universe they didn't belong in, then why couldn't werewolves be real? By comparison, werewolves had more rights to exist than the demo-whatevers; at least they *belonged* in their world.

The digital watch strapped to Billy's wrist began to beep, loud and insistent. Glancing at the display, Billy's face hardened imperceptibly. His eyes flickered to Steve momentarily before he shifted his view to the front door.

"So you're content to wait it out till then?" Steve asked, standing up as Billy walked by him and to the door, glancing out one of the street-facing windows briefly.

"No, but I fucking have to," Billy muttered, eyes scanning the street before he looked back at the readout on his watch. "It's not like we can *force* the moon to come early. We need a damn plan. Well, *I* had a fucking plan, but you tuned that right out, didn't ya?"

"A plan for *what*?"

Turning away from the window, Billy appeared both excited and apprehensive. He was smiling, baring his teeth and running his tongue along their edges, but it seemed to stem more from

nervousness than anything else. Steve's first thought was that he looked like a caged animal ready to defend itself, and an uneasy feeling settled into his gut.

"For if I'm right, Christ, why don't you listen? Now get the fuck out of my house, we'll talk about this later."

Billy's dad came home a mere ten minutes after Steve left, angry and without reason for it. He never seemed to need a reason to be angry these days though, and as he felt his father's rage strike him, Billy imagined that Neil must have somehow known all along about Billy's secret meeting with '*that Harrington boy*'. The assault was deserved, one way or another, in his father's eyes.

Later that night, Billy came down with another fever. The cause of it wasn't clear to him, as it could've been a myriad of different things, but regardless, he felt its exhausting effects and had to turn in early.

A great heat consumed him, troubling him when he found he couldn't stop *sweating*; repenting for the sin of having brought another *boy* into to the house by perspiring to death. The fever was so terrible that when he finally tried to lie down to sleep, wearing only his underwear and lying overtop of the bedcovers in a home that couldn't afford to run the heat in the winter, he opened his bedroom window so that the chilling breeze might offer him some respite.

It was soothing enough to allow him to rest, but his skin remained sticky and sheen when he finally did close his eyes. His sleep was light, due in part to the fever he couldn't stop sweating out and owing also to the nightmares that had begun to plague him recently, offering him horrific visions of what his future might hold in store for him if he didn't figure this '*werewolf*' thing out.

It was two hours after he first fell asleep that Billy woke from one of the nightmares with a deep, shuddering gasp, and for a moment as he lay there panting, he thought it likely that he had woken himself up.

He was cold now, the fever abated as he lay shivering in the freezing breeze that flooded in from his window. Some snowfall had accumulated on the sill, leaving small little puddles as they melted

down. He was disgusted to note how sticky he'd become as his bedcover stuck to his back when he sat up. When he reached back to peel the fabric from his back, he heard a noise like someone walking- no, *running*- through the snow outside, a dark blur against the blackness rushing by his window.

Billy froze in place, slowly turning his head to look out the window. His heart rate slowly began to pick up as he heard the shuffling footsteps of *something* creeping around out there, running in circles. He took in a deep breath to calm himself and realized, suddenly, that he could *smell* it- a rotting, fetid scent was wafting in on the winter air as the beast outside ran laps around his home.

His blood ran cold in an instant, and for a moment, he didn't know what to do.

'Let's say it is real,' he could hear himself telling Steve all those nights ago. *'What's to stop it from just following you home?'*

It had tracked him down, using the pheromones or whatever hormones his fever sweat had exuded to find him at home with the window open, practically inviting it inside to kill him in his sleep.

The darkness of his room was unsettling as he listened to it snuffling around, taking in huge breaths as it skulked around in the night. Carefully and as quietly as he could, Billy slowly began to swivel his legs off the mattress, unsure of what he was going to do but knowing instinctively that he couldn't sit still for it to just find him. His feet touched the cold, hardwood of the floor and he almost recoiled at the freezing touch, and as childish as the thought was, he couldn't help but fear that something was going to reach out from underneath his bed and grab his ankles before he could do anything to combat the monster that was now hunting him.

The noises outside stopped for a moment, as though the creature could sense that Billy was on the move. He himself stopped moving, heart pounding in his chest even as he tried to convince himself that whatever was outside was just a large dog or something; a sick deer just trying to find a bite to eat underneath his window. He couldn't move his eyes away from that deep, dark square of night that was framed by the window as he sat paralyzed on the edge of his bed, and

distantly he realized he'd begun to sweat again.

Just as he started to think that perhaps whatever it was had left, threatened by the thought of pretty that could fight back, he heard it again, but instead of an animals feet padding softly through the snow, foraging for sustenance that could not be found, the sound of something hard and sharp clacking against the sideboard of his house began to make his hair stand on end.

It was climbing; scraping its claws alongside the house as it tried to make its way into the open window.

Coming for him.

As strong as he knew he was, Billy felt terribly weak in that moment, unable to contain his panic. He shot up from the bed, disregarding the instinct that told him to just fucking *run* out of there as fast as he could and instead found himself lunging forward for the window, slamming it down hard enough to shake the frame as though it would be enough to protect him.

With his heart pounding he stared out into the darkness, face mere inches away from the glass pane he knew wouldn't be enough of an effective barrier to keep it out.

There was no movement from the other side. The night was utterly and completely still; a void of darkness kept at bay by thin glass. It was stupid of him to sit there and keep watch, he knew, but he had to be sure it was gone. Being as scared as he was made him feel like a powerless child, and if he could write this incident off as just another vivid dream, then he'd be far better off for it. Still, nothing moved as he sat there, though the glass had begun to fog up, making it hard for him to see anything. Billy wiped at it with his hand, mistakenly thinking his own heavy breathing had caused the condensation, and found himself rendered immobile yet again when the beady red eyes of the beast surged into focus.

Billy stared transfixed as dread consumed him, rooting him in place, his hand pressed to the cold glass. He couldn't think, couldn't move, couldn't do *anything* but watch as the werewolf grinned, spreading its lips in a wide snarl to show off all its teeth, taunting him, *challenging*

him.

I will see your flesh torn asunder, boy; ripped to pieces, chunks in my jaw, bone between my teeth, down my throat, your blood boiling in my belly.

With a scream rising up in the back of his throat, Billy did bolt then, shooting himself off his bed and launching himself away from the window that the creature was perched at, waiting to bust in and fulfill its promise. He collided against his closed door with a thud, and he fumbled with the handle, trying to open it without taking his eyes away from where he could see it, opening its wide mouth, exposing *more*, so much more as it pressed its gnarled hand against the glass to finally break through-

His door came open suddenly, spilling him out into the darkness of the hallway to land on the cold floor, chest heaving as he scrambled, trying to get to his feet but unable to find enough traction to set him straight.

"Billy?"

He almost let out a shout when he heard Max say his name.

"What're you doing on the floor?" Her voice was tired and her eyes were heavily lidded with exhaustion as she stepped out of their shared bathroom, the sound of the toilet's weak flush gurgling behind her. She yawned and rubbed her face, waiting for a response to justify his weird behaviour.

He opened his mouth to speak, but his voice was gone. Instead he swallowed, and turned away from her to look back at his window, afraid of what dark, horrible shape would be crawling through it.

But there was nothing to be seen; the monster was gone, if it had truly ever been there at all.

"What're you looking at?"

Max stood behind him, peering into his dark room curiously when he didn't answer her question.

"Go back to your room," he finally said, though his voice was hoarse

and he had to repeat himself.

"What are you, the hall monitor? I had to piss," she said, using the snarky tone of voice she reserved only for him. "What are you doing on the floor?"

"I'm not," he replied, finally finding the strength required to get to his feet.

"Well, you *were*."

"I'm not now, am I?" Billy snapped irritably, turning a mean look on her. Despite his fright, he was careful to keep his voice low. The last thing he wanted to do now was to wake up his father in the middle of the night. "Get the fuck back in your room and go the fuck to sleep."

Max rolled her eyes and didn't move, lingering in the hall. She looked away from Billy's room and back towards her own, biting at her lip.

"I heard something outside," she said at last, speaking quietly. "Something was running around outside the house. It woke me up, but I couldn't see anything when I looked. Too dark."

"Just a dog," Billy replied, swallowing hard, hoping she didn't hear the waver in his voice. He wasn't able to meet her eye as he said it. "It was just a dog. I yelled at it and it ran off, okay?"

"A dog?" Max had an alarmed look in her eye. "What kind of dog? Did you get a good look at it? How big was it?"

"I don't know, what does it matter? It was just some stray," he said. "I told it to fuck off and it did; it's gone now, so go back to sleep you little shit before you wake someone up."

"*You're* the one shouting at animals in the middle of the night," Max bit back, but despite her attitude, she still looked worried. "You're sure it was a...? Nevermind, whatever, I'm going back to sleep," she grumbled, and turned away to go back to her room, shutting the door just hard enough to let Billy know she didn't value his authority.

Alone in the darkness of the hall, Billy's eye was drawn back to the window. He wondered where the thing had crawled off to, and if it

would be coming back. More timidly than he would have liked to admit, he stepped back into the cold enclosure of his room and quietly closed the door behind him.

"Hey, Steve, man, I really just wanna thank you again for offering me a ride home," Dustin said, already breathing hard. In his arms was a box full of the things he'd used for his final presentation in whatever science class he'd taken that semester, the weight of which was cumbersome enough to have him struggling to carry it. Ordinarily, Steve would have offered to help him carry it, but he wasn't thinking straight.

'Later', as Billy had said at the start of the weekend, had ended up being earlier that morning on the first day of finals. Cornered in the bathroom (the fucking *bathroom*, of all places), Billy had locked the door and sequestered them in the math halls men's room during the downtime between finals. He'd lit a cigarette and leaned against the stained porcelain sink, his shirt unbuttoned and open to accommodate his sling, and told him about his plan. It had been a simple one, but they wouldn't be able to see it through alone.

They needed a private place; somewhere they could quarantine Billy in case something really *did* happen with him, and the closer it got to the next full moon, the more Billy seemed convinced that something *would* happen.

"My teeth're starting to come loose," he'd admitted reluctantly, averting his eyes as he ran his tongue along them, prodding at the loose ones in agitation.

"Y'sure that's not just bad dental hygiene?" Steve had joked, but his remark had only been met with scorn.

"Just because I *live* in a hick town doesn't mean I'm going to *become* a toothless hick," Billy had snapped, but even through all his bravado, Steve felt he could sense his fear. "I brush my damn teeth Harrington. I take *care* of my appearance. And it's not just one tooth," he'd said as he rinsed the cigarette butt under a stream of water, putting out the cherry before flicking it into the can, "it's all of them."

On top of that, Billy had seemed haggard when they'd spoken; there was an overall dullness to him that suggested he hadn't been sleeping well lately, but they weren't at the point in their fucked up relationship where he felt he should ask about it. Instead he'd simply agreed to Billy's plan; it wasn't like he'd come up with a better one, but it meant he'd have to drag someone else into their mess. For as large and private as his home was, it didn't offer what Billy felt they needed.

But he knew Dustin's did. He'd been there before; seen with his own eyes what it could contain.

"I really owe you one," Dustin wheezed, his voice sounding strained and distant, and Steve was surprised at how far he'd managed to fall behind him in their trek through the parking lot. Coming out of his ruminations, he turned in time to watch as Dustin nearly stumbled through the gravel, trying to reclaim his balance quickly before he spilled the contents of his science project into the soggy earth.

"Whoa, hey, let me get that," Steve said, backstepping to relieve Dustin of his burden. The box was heavier than it looked, and nearly fell through his unprepared arms as he took it from him. "Geeze, man, you bring your whole damn chem set in or what?"

Dustin whistled in relief before replying.

"Had to, turns out students aren't allowed to use any of the school's equipment on the last day of class because no one wants to stay late to clean it. Myself included, obviously."

"Well that's bogus," Steve absently said, to which Dustin agreed.

"Tell me about it," he bemoaned, cracking his back as they approached Steve's car.

Setting the box of Dustin's things on the rear of his car, Steve dug his keys out of his coat pocket and unlocked the doors. He set the box carefully in the back seat, making sure it was stable enough not to tilt and spill if he took a turn too fast, and stepped back to see Dustin staring curiously at the ugly seat cover stretched over the front passenger seat.

"What's with that? Having some work done?"

"Something like that," Steve replied dismissively. He'd tell Dustin about it later, but for now he didn't want the kid worrying about anything he didn't have to. "But uh, speaking of *owing me one*, I need to talk to you about cashing that in."

"What, already?" Dustin looked a little surprised, but Steve could only shrug lackadaisically. "When I said that, you know, I kinda figured that you'd be cashing it in waaaaay off in the *very* distant future. Or you'd forget I said anything at all, so I wouldn't have to *actually* do anything."

Steve laughed, but it sounded forced, and Dustin frowned a little bit at the harsh sound of it.

"I promise I wouldn't actually ask you to do something for me unless it was important. Get in so I can turn the heater on and we can talk about it."

A look of contemplation crossed Dustin's face briefly before he got in the car, preemptively putting his seat belt on as Steve started the engine and cranked the heater on to its highest setting, the airflow tousling his hair. Dustin didn't like the way Steve's brow kept creasing, or the way Steve had seemed so distant during the walk from the school building to the car. And now he wanted to talk.

"So, talking?" Dustin prompted.

"I need to borrow your basement," Steve said, coming right out with the request instead of wasting both of their time by trying to make it not sound weird. There was no easy way to say it.

Dustin blinked; an owlish and slow movement that, for a moment, made Steve feel like Dustin suddenly knew everything.

"I don't have a basement," he said instead. Steve balked.

"Bullshit," he said. "You dragged me back there to kill that lizard pet thing of yours that one time."

"*Cellar*," Dustin corrected, enunciating the word slowly and precisely.

"I don't have a basement, I have a *cellar*. *Mike* is the one with the basement, dingus."

Taken back momentarily, it was Steve's turn to blink dumbly.

"Well what the hell's the difference? Nevermind, don't answer," Steve said, speaking quickly as Dustin opened his mouth and took in a breath to begin explaining. "Fine, cellar, *whatever*; I need to use it."

"What for?" Dustin asked suspiciously. "Wait. Are you planning on throwing an end of semester party? Why not just use your house? Or is it themed?"

"No, man, it's not a party; like I said, this is *important*," Steve stressed, growing impatient with the way the conversation was developing.

"Parties *are* important, Steve; *you* taught me that."

Groaning loudly, Steve tossed his head back and stared up at the roof for a moment.

"Okay, yeah, they *are*, but this is a different *kind* of important, okay? Like, it's for something serious," he continued, hoping Dustin would understand without telling him too much. "Trust me, if I *was* trying to throw a party, the whole school would have known about it by now. Just, loan me your basement."

"Cellar," Dustin corrected again, but without any of his usual haughtiness.

While Dustin wouldn't say Steve was *dumb*, per se, he would have to say that he wasn't exactly... subtle. Analyzing Steve's behaviour, and knowing what he'd used his own cellar for in the past, it was easy to come to the conclusion that Steve wanted to utilize the space in much the same way he himself had done when he realized Dart was growing up to be something of a problem child. Steve didn't want it for recreational use, but instead wanted it so he could *contain* something. Even before they'd gotten into the car, Steve had seemed tense, as though he'd been steeling himself to have this conversation, further justifying his line of thought.

"Steve," Dustin asked slowly, turning in his seat a little bit and

scrunching up the fabric of the seat-cover to face his friend, "is this a code red?"

Meeting Dustin's eye, Steve saw that he was finally taking their conversation seriously. A graveness had overtaken his usually carefree expression, and he hated the way it made his young face seem to age.

"I don't know yet," he answered honestly, sighing and adjusting the air vent so it wasn't blowing heat directly on him anymore. "It might not be, but it potentially could be."

"Oh, Christ," Dustin groaned, slouching back in his seat and staring out forlornly through the windshield. "I thought we solved all this when El- *Jane*- closed the rift. What is it this time? More dogs? An Upside Down puppy? Shit, is it a *cat*?"

"No, no, it's nothing like... nothing like those *things* from before," Steve was quick to say, but wasn't sure how much information he should divulge. After all, like Billy said, it might not be anything, except... Except he had *symptoms* now. "If it was, I definitely would've said something about it before now."

Mulling the answer over in his head, Dustin then asked: "Does it have to do with the bear attack?"

Sitting back in his seat, Steve sighed and glanced up into his rearview mirror. Billy was there, a distant, lone figure, but he was there, and he was watching, waiting for him to secure a spot where they would be safe to test their theory.

"I can't tell you right now, but I promise it's nothing I can't handle."

"Alright," Dustin said after a moment, though he sounded dubious. He was frowning deeply, lost in his own thoughts before he said, "When will you know for sure? After you use the cellar? If we need to assemble the rest of the party, I can-"

"No, no, don't uh, 'assemble the party' just yet," Steve said. "I don't want to alarm everyone only for it to be a false alarm, you know?"

"Christ," Dustin mumbled again, looking miserable as he slowly began

to slouch in his seat. "Okay, fine, you can use my cellar for whatever fucked up containment bay you need it for, but you *have* to tell me what the hell's going on afterwards, okay?"

"I will, man, I swear."

"Shit." Dustin heaved a sigh and sat up, rising out of his slump. His seat belt clicked noisily, locked into place as it refused to let out anymore slack.

Steve watched him undo the belt and re-buckle it with a hint of amusement. He hated that he had to give Dustin reason to worry, but at least school would be over soon, and they wouldn't have to split their focus and try to decide which was more important.

"Think I can take the loan out on your *cellar* this Friday?" he asked after Dustin had resituated himself. "And look man, you and your mom? You guys can't be there. Think you can arrange to get out of the house for the night?"

Groaning loudly, Dustin eventually nodded.

"My mom's been telling me over and over we need to go visit her sister," he said. "Aunt Connie hasn't seen my teeth since they came in and wants to see them; the only girl alive who wants to see them and it's my *aunt*."

Steve laughed earnestly at his comment, and when Dustin caught the look of honest amusement on his face, he cracked a grin too.

"But the worst part? You wanna know what the *worst* part is, Steve? She *pinches*, man! I'm gonna look like I have blisters on my face when I get back!"

Steve cackled with delight, picturing Dustin's face pinched so hard his cheeks would be naturally rosy for days afterwards.

"Hey, I'm real sorry about that; I'll take you out to lunch or something when you get back, alright?" he said, feeling the burden of having to put Billy's plan into motion lift from his shoulders. They had their spot secured; now they only had to wait for the weekend to use, and then, if they were lucky, they would be able to move on.

"Oh, you'll be owing me much more than that if I survive," Dustin muttered, grinning cheekily as Steve finally put the car into gear and began to drive them out of the lot.

"Here's hoping," Steve said with a wink.

10. The House That Dripped Blood

"Bigfoot."

Hopper leaned back in his chair; let it creak and groan under his weight until he knew it was at its limit, and then pushed it a little more. He studied the no-nonsense expression on the hunter before him, and intrinsically knew that the man was speaking truth.

"Bigfoot," the old man said again, speaking a little sterner than he had before once he recognized Hopper's amiable expression of disbelief. "I seen't him out in the woods just the other day."

The aging man had lumbered into the police station almost immediately after Hopper came in, bundled in some worn hunting gear that looked almost as old as he was. The deputies had offered to speak with him after hearing his initial claim, but they'd been refused when Callahan couldn't stop smirking. The old hunter had insisted on speaking with Hopper, who leaned forward now, taking the stress off of his chair to take a sip of the coffee Florence had brought in for him. He didn't look at the old man as he drank.

"So let me get this straight," Hopper began, setting his coffee aside to rub at his forehead, "you came in first thing in the morning worried about a missing friend of yours, but now you're telling me you're worried about *Bigfoot*."

"You know me, Jim," the hunter said, a slight hint of pleading desperation edging out of his voice. "You *know* I ain't some crazy old coot. I ain't seen Lamm in a long while, and yessir I'm worried 'bout him, but when I went out to his cabin to check on him I *seen* it: I seen Bigfoot!"

As incredulous as the claim was, Hopper believed him- not about it being *Bigfoot*, exactly, but he believed that the man had seen *something* out there in the woods, and it had the possibility of being that *something* he'd spent the last two weeks fruitlessly searching for.

Regardless, he didn't want to let the old hunter know he was taking him seriously. The last thing he needed was for his community to

think he believed in this sort of nonsense, but people in town were going missing, and people he knew were getting hurt: if his only lead should turn up in the form of an old man believing he'd caught sight of an urban legend, then so be it. He'd follow it through, but he'd be subtle about it.

"You sure it wasn't just a trick of the light or something, Wes? You know your eyes aren't what they used to be," Hopper remarked casually, softening his voice to let him down easy. "And this isn't the first time Lamm's gone missing; you know he's one of *those* types of shut ins. Remember those weeks he was gone hunting 'vampires'? He's the kind of guy who lives in his own head more than he lives out here, he'll turn up again on his own time."

The hunter's lips twitched into a frown. "Alright, maybe Lamm is a little off kilter," he relented, averting his eyes for a second, "and maybe it *weren't* Bigfoot, but the tracks it left were huge 'n mighty, by God, and I ain't seen nothin' else like it before. If it weren't *Bigfoot*, then at the very least it had big *feet*, Jim, and I ain't never seen feet quite like 'em."

Interest piqued, Hopper became more attentive. "How's that?"

"Well, they was stretched out lookin', for one." The hunter paused, tilting his head slightly as he tried to recall the details of what he'd seen out in the woods. He held his hands up, spaced apart in an approximation of how long the prints he'd found had been. "Human lookin', almost, which is what had me thinkin' it coulda been Bigfoot. They weren't the tracks of somethin' native 'round here, and I only caught but the barest glimpse of it, but it was tall, Jim; taller'n you or I."

That sounded right; the prints he'd found and unsuccessfully tracked were, as the hunter said, 'huge 'n mighty' and matched the description of what he'd just been told. It didn't take an expert's opinion (though he *had* consulted one) to discern that the markings just weren't *natural*. Hopper set his mug of coffee aside and pulled out a notepad from one of his desk drawers. He uncapped a pen and held it to the page for a moment before writing down a few preliminary notes for himself on the top line.

The hunter cocked his head and leaned forward to look at what he was writing and said, "That don't look official."

"Because it's not; this one's just gonna be between us, alright?" Hopper said, looking up to meet Wesley's blue, watery eyes. He held the stare long enough to get his point across, waiting for a sign of affirmation before looking back to the notepad and pressing the tip of the pen to the paper. "Tell me where and when exactly you saw this 'Bigfoot' of yours."

The day was cold and grey at its start, with harsh, biting winds ushering in thick clouds that blocked out any hope of the sun ever making an appearance. Steve eyed the sky apprehensively as he made his way back to his car, wary of the way the clouds looked as though they might start dropping hail on him at a moment's notice. Billy feigned disinterest as Steve opened the rear passenger door and leaned in to shove the box of things he'd bought at the Hunting & Camping store into the backseat. Even with his vision obscured in part by the sunglasses he'd elected to wear, he didn't miss the strong look of annoyance that graced Steve's features when he came around to the driver's seat and entered the car with a pout.

"That guy give you a hard time or something?" Billy asked as Steve buckled in and put the BMW into reverse, turning in his seat to hastily jerk the car out of the parking lot. "Why do you look like someone shit in your cereal?"

Steve clicked his tongue. "He just kept asking what a 'kid like me' needed with a bunch of chains and rope and shit. My god, he just would *not* let it go, like he thought I was trying to build my own sex dungeon or something. Fucking annoying."

"You mean that's not what we're doing?" Billy asked, grinning a bit at the way Steve's face pinched up in disgust. "What'd you say?"

"I told him the truth; said it was to tie up a werewolf. 'It's a full moon tonight, y'know? Gotta tie 'em down or they go all crazy on you', I said to him, and you know what he said to me *then*?" Steve asked, speeding out of the little downtown shopping area Hawkins played host to and sounding every bit as gossipy as Carol did when she

caught wind of a scandal.

"How the fuck would I?" Billy drawled, turning away from the conversation to watch the scenery pass by disinterestedly.

"He said, 'Damn fool kids will never learn'," Steve said, ignoring him. "Damn fool kids will never learn', like, what the hell does *that* mean?"

Billy shrugged. "Who knows? As long as he accepted daddy's plastic then what does it matter?"

Steve clicked his tongue again in annoyance and rolled his eyes. "Fuck you."

Feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on, Billy declined to retort. They rode on in silence, the chains in the box Steve had bought clinking together softly in the backseat before the radio was finally turned on to mask the sound.

Regardless of whether or not Steve *actually* believed something was going to happen to Billy that night, he couldn't deny that the whole day leading up to that evening just felt... off. From meeting up with Billy earlier that afternoon to go by the camping store, to grabbing lunch together before heading over to the Henderson's house, it all felt *wrong*.

It was something Steve had difficulty pinpointing the origins of, but as they began work on clearing out enough space in the cellar for Billy to do whatever it was he thought he was going to do, he soon came to realize that the feeling of wrongness seemed to stem from Billy himself.

Few words could better describe Billy than 'annoying' or 'smart-mouthed', but he'd been uncharacteristically tight-lipped all day. He'd become a remarkably dull version of himself, and Steve wasn't sure quite how to handle that.

Usually one to argue and bite back at everything Steve said, when he'd begun dishing out instructions on how best to clear out some floor space in the cellar, Billy hadn't talked back to him a single time; merely lit a cigarette and blinked at him slowly, silently

acknowledging what had been asked of him before getting on with it.

It was unsettling. Steve could almost say that he hated how submissive Billy was because of how used he'd gotten to the back-talk and smart-ass remarks Billy usually had ready for him, and though, yes, there were times he *had* wished for this kind of attitude from him, the silence and absolute subordination coupled with all of the other behavioral changes Billy was exhibiting were enough to set Steve on edge.

Billy kept tonguing the gaps in his teeth where they'd fallen out over the course of the week, and he never seemed to realize he wasn't alone. Sometimes he'd jump at the sound of Steve's voice, or shake his head and crease his brow in confusion when he turned around to see Steve moving stuff somewhere behind him, but arguably the worst part of it all was that he *stank*.

He'd tried to mask it with an overabundance of cologne that had nearly suffocated Steve when they began working in closer quarters, but buried beneath that was a hint of something that smelled awfully rotten. If he had to, Steve *could* liken it to the stench of the monster they'd encountered in the woods, but he chose not to, instead chalking it up to a severe case of nervous b.o. or something. The implications that the scents could be related bothered him too deeply to believe, and even then he wasn't sure he really wanted to know what the source of the smell *was*.

The stench of decay emanating from Billy's person was worrisome enough on its own, but with so much to do in order to get ready before sunset, Steve had a hard time figuring out where to primarily apply his focus: there were simply too many things going on for him to worry about one thing more than another.

The giant hole in the wall that Dart made to tunnel out of the cellar was his immediate concern, but Dustin had done a good job of hiding it from his mother by placing a tall shelf in front of it, essentially blocking it off. That didn't mean it wasn't entirely inaccessible, but Steve wasn't sure what more he could do about it. In all honesty, he'd forgotten about it until he'd tried to move the shelf aside and then found himself peeking into the eerie tunnel. He'd knocked over several things in his haste to put the shelf back in place, but Billy

hadn't seemed to notice it, and if he didn't, maybe he wouldn't think to use it if- or when- he lost himself to whatever supernatural effects he was experiencing.

"Big if, though," Steve muttered aloud to himself. Turning away from the shelf, he looked over to where Billy was inspecting some old power tools, turning a nail gun over in his hands before setting it back in the box he'd pulled it out of. "So, are we good or what? This baby-proofed enough for you?" Steve asked, startling Billy out of whatever ruminations he'd been lost to.

Billy looked at Steve blankly, face impassive and emotionless. He frowned, and then looked around himself as though he'd forgotten where he was. When he spoke, his voice was monotone and devoid of his usual arrogance as he said, "I don't know, Harrington; is it?"

"You tell me, man, this was your idea." Steve watched as Billy returned his focus on the box of tools he'd originally been rummaging through. Picking up a hammer, Billy balanced its weight in his hands before gripping the handle tightly. Steve distrusted the look in Billy's eye as he held it. "What are you, a child? Quit rifling through their shit, put it back," he said.

Billy didn't reply or even acknowledge that he'd heard him. Ignoring Steve's demand, he stepped up to the abandoned work bench to splay his left hand out over the wood and lifted the ballpeen up.

"What the fuck are you doing? Put it *down*," Steve said again, his voice rising slightly in pitch when he understood what Billy was doing. He started towards him in an effort to stop him, but halted when the hammer was brought crashing down.

It missed his hand, but the force of the impact splintered the wooden table's surface. Steve gaped as Billy turned around, a cocky little smile turning up his lips.

"Someone could get hurt real bad down here if they weren't careful, huh, Harrington?" he said, a fierceness that Steve hated to admit he'd missed charging his voice. "But we've been *real* careful cleaning this shithole out, haven't we, pally?"

"You sick piece of shit, give me that," Steve snapped, snatching the hammer away from Billy's pliant grip. "Fuck you, Hargrove; you could've just *said* you wanted to move this shit out of here."

"Had you pegged as being more of a visual learner," Billy sneered as Steve threw the hammer back into the box of tools. "Your concern was touching, though, *really*."

"*You're* the one who came asking *me* for help, fuckface. Begged me, almost, if I'm remembering right. 'Oh, Steve, help me, I'm so scared of fake movie monsters!'"

Steve hadn't meant to rise to the taunt, but Billy's insufferable attitude had him stooping to his level as he hoisted the hefty box of tools in his arms and lugged them over to the stairway. Billy laughed dryly at Steve's mocking tone.

"We *both* wish that fucking thing had been fake," he said as Steve placed the box on the ground at the foot of the stairs beside the box of supplies he'd bought earlier. They were both quiet for a moment, their attempt at a conversation dying as quickly as it had been brought on.

"Only one thing left to do then," Steve said morosely.

Billy blinked and turned to face the stairway, eyes rising slowly up to where the cellar doors were propped open wide. Steve felt the guilt of having to lock him in prematurely and had to remind himself that he *wanted* to be locked in.

"Better hop to it then, Harrington," Billy said lowly, lips curling back into a familiar grin, but without all his teeth in place to flesh it out, Steve found the display to be more unsettling than annoying. "Let's get this sex dungeon set up."

Steve grimaced. "Not even in your wildest dreams, Hargrove."

"Nothing's off the table in *my* dreams, pretty boy." Billy breathed out a small laugh at the disgusted look on Steve's face, but the grin he'd been displaying slowly fell away. "Is it getting dark yet?"

"Uh, kind of, but the sun hasn't set yet," Steve replied, stepping up

into the stairwell to check the status of the sky. It was as dull and grey as it had been all day, the overcast weather acting as a harbinger for the snowfall the local meteorologist had foretold was coming. "If you took off those fucking sunglasses you'd be able to tell."

"These are for your benefit as much as mine," Billy snapped, frowning suddenly.

"Yeah, okay, whatever *that* means," Steve said dismissively as he began to fish out the cords of rope from the box, letting them spool out onto the ground before gathering them into his hands. "How do you uh, how do you want to do this?"

"Aw, is this kitten's first time tying someone up?" Billy purred, not moving from where he stood in the middle of the cellar, directly under the light. "Who knew 'King' Steve's favourite flavor was *vanilla*."

Steve rolled his eyes as he brought the ropes over, wrinkling his nose at the mixed smell of rot and cologne that got stronger with proximity. "I've dated girls kinkier than you'd know what to do with," he retorted as he gestured for Billy to hold out his hands.

"Oh please," Billy said with a snort, "there *are* no kinky girls in Hawkins or I would've found them by now."

"You're obviously not looking hard enough," Steve muttered in response, gesturing again for Billy to hold out his hands.

Shrugging out of his leather jacket and tossing it over the work table he'd splintered, Billy held his hands up obediently and watched stoically as Steve wound the rope around his wrists, binding his hands together roughly.

"What's should our safe word be?" Billy teased, smirking as Steve wound another, longer length of rope over the original knot.

"There *is* no safe word because this *isn't* a sex thing!" Steve insisted angrily.

Flustered, he sighed irritably as he wound the long part of the rope around Billy's waist, hating how close he had to get in order to make

sure the rope was tight enough, though Billy seemed to be enjoying how close he'd gotten. He kept shifting his weight around, trying, it seemed, to get Steve into a more compromising position. Annoyed, but determined to finish, Steve did his best to ignore Billy's constant movement and the disgusting, rotten musk that was wafting off of his person to finish tying him up.

"Why do you fucking stink so goddamn badly?" Steve finally asked with a scowl, repressing the urge to gag as he tied the ropes off into a clumsy knot. He stumbled away from Billy, reaching up to pinch his nostrils shut so he wouldn't have to smell the rot anymore, but the rancid scent seemed to have lodged itself deep into his nose. "You smell like a dead Calvin Klein model or something, holy *shit*, did you use a whole fucking *bottle*?"

The amusement Billy had held while taunting Steve left his face. His smirk shrunk into an awkward grimace as he looked away in embarrassment.

"I don't know, alright?" he admitted bitterly. "It doesn't matter how much I bathe, and between that and my eyes I have no idea what the fuck's going on with me."

"What about your eyes?" Steve asked hesitantly, unsure if he really wanted to know the reasoning behind why Billy had insisted on wearing sunglasses all day.

Billy faltered for a moment, hesitating briefly before reaching up and plucking the sunglasses off his face. With both hands bound together, he awkwardly folded the legs against the lenses and tucked them into the collar of his button up. He turned his gaze to Steve, who couldn't help but suck in a slight breath of surprise.

His eyes were so bloodshot they looked ready to start bleeding straight out of the sockets. There were hardly any whites left in the sclera to be seen as Billy winked at him, looking immensely uncomfortable at the way Steve was gaping openly at him.

"Do they- hurt? Or whatever?" Steve asked, unconsciously taking a few steps forward to get a better look. In the dim lighting of the basement, even the blues of Billy's eyes looked reddish.

"What's it to you if they do?" Billy snapped, suddenly irritable. He squared his jaw and looked away, unable to face the amount of concern Steve was showing him.

The worry Steve felt for the both of them in that moment grew stronger as he backed off, letting the matter of the changes in Billy's physicality drop, despite how alarming they were. "If I don't hear anything an hour after the sun goes down, I'll let you out," Steve said abruptly as he walked backwards towards the stairwell, grasping for the hand rail behind him blindly, unsure why he was so reluctant now to let Billy out of his sight. It was what they'd agreed upon earlier, and he said it meaning for it to sound reassuring, but the way Billy's lips twitched made it apparent he didn't interpret it that way.

Billy didn't respond.

"Well, uh, I guess that's it then," Steve said as he bent down, placing his box of chains atop the box of tools Billy had been messing around with before lifting them up together to carry them up and out of their man-made dungeon.

The cellar doors shrieked loudly as they were closed, a high pitched agony that erupted when the metal grinded against itself uncooperatively. Steve didn't mind that so much as he hated the sound the chains made as he wove them through the door handles, reminding him of what he was doing and who he was imprisoning as the steel rattled sharply against the doors. He winced at the commotion, but continued to loop them through the small door handles until no more could be fit between them. He tested their sturdiness by attempting to pull them open, and to his pleasure, they remained shut. The doors were secured; the cellar, as far as he was concerned, was now a suitable prison. All that was left of him now was to play the role of the jailor appropriately.

He stared down at his handiwork for a moment before the cold, blowing winds prompted him to seek shelter. Already a few snowflakes were fluttering out of the sky, flying into his cheeks as he turned away, re-gathering the box of tools in his arms and headed for the door Dustin promised he'd leave a key for.

Searching under the backdoor mat, Steve found the promised key,

and true to the rest of Dustin's word, the entire home was empty, save for the cat that chirped a greeting for him from atop the kitchen counter. With a deep intake of breath Steve glanced at his watch, stepped inside, and shut the door behind him, wondering if he really was prepared for the worst. In the trunk of his car his bat waited for him, ready to be put to use just in case shit really did hit the fan, but he found himself questioning if he'd really be able to use it; bludgeoning monsters to death was one thing, but turning it on a boy he knew was only a monster *figuratively* was something else entirely.

For both his and Billy's sakes, he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Shrugging out of his thick coat, Steve set it down beside him as he took a seat on the Henderson's couch. He glanced at his watch again, dismayed by the fact that time wasn't progressing as fast as he wished it was and sat in anxious worry about what the rest of the night might have in store.

But at least he was comfortable and warm.

The cellar was not.

It wasn't the cold that Billy minded, so much as it was the *anticipation*: when would the transformation start? Exactly at sundown? A little before? A little after? *Would* he actually end up transforming? And why the fuck did the word 'transform' make him so damn uncomfortable? The unknown factors surrounding his circumstances were almost worse than any of the physical symptoms he'd been experiencing as of late, and he'd been experiencing *a lot*.

Anxiety wasn't something Billy had a lot of experience with, but it was the only thing he could think of that explained why his heart had been beating oddly all day. It was running at a notably higher rate, as though he'd been playing basketball or working out extraneously, and brought on palpitations he wasn't used to dealing with at the elevated speed.

In short he felt terrible. His whole body ached like it was going through puberty again. Both his arms and legs were sore in ways that mimicked the aches that came with growing pains when he'd had them, but he couldn't understand why he would begin to hurt in that

way again. He hadn't had the energy to work out in two days despite eating practically anything he could get his hands on, so the soreness in his limbs was unwarranted. Either his body was preparing itself for the coming night, or he was having an incredibly drawn-out heart attack.

Standing at the foot of the stairwell, Billy felt the cold permeating in through the closed opening and moved away to find a better spot to wait. He wanted rub his arms to bring some warmth into them, but couldn't with the way they were bound. Already the ropes were beginning to dig into his wrists, rubbing uncomfortably against his skin as he realized he wasn't actually that cold anyway, despite the frigid weather; his body temperature had been on a steady incline leading up to now, leaving him with a rosy complexion and a near constant fever, the long-term effects of which left him feeling severely disoriented.

He could barely remember meeting up at Steve's house only a few hours ago to carpool to his kid friend's house, riding with the windows down in spite of the severe wind-chill as they went into town to get lunch and buy rope. Even though they'd ridden together, he couldn't remember now if they'd actually talked about anything or not. All he *could* remember were the low tones of the radio and the resonating throbs of the wind as it swooped in through the open windows, rushing to fill the audial space between them. It was as though his mind had been steeped in a fog, and he couldn't accurately think through it: everything was clouded over, incomprehensible, like waking up the morning after a bender and being unable to remember everything he'd done the night before, but knowing all the same that he'd taken part in some memorable shit.

Would there be pain, he wondered, and would it come on as suddenly as it had to the character in the movie he'd made Steve watch? Even though '*American Werewolf*' was just a movie, stories like that had to spawn from *some* sort of truth, didn't they?

The dim little lightbulb that hung overhead flickered briefly, drawing Billy's attention to it as he took a seat at the work table's bench, wishing his eyes weren't a dry and sore as they were.

Coming from above, he could hear the muffled sounds of a TV show

permeating through the cellar's ceiling. He couldn't help but think ill of Steve in that moment, but if their situations had been reversed, he probably would have been doing the same thing; he couldn't fault Harrington for finding a way to pass the time, though he wished he had something similar to do for himself. There was nothing interesting to hold his attention, and time passed at a dreadfully slow rate.

Stretching out on the bench, he laid himself down slowly, mindful of which parts of his back hurt the most, and gazed up at the cement overhead disinterestedly. He listened to the muffled sounds of the distant television, trying to conjure an image in his mind that corresponded with what little dialogue he could hear, but the rapid beating of his heart overpowered the noises coming from the TV. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing in an attempt to lower his heart rate, but it just kept going, pounding in a determined rhythm that seemed to be quickening with each passing minute. A bead of sweat trickled down from his scalp and over his ear as he wondered if the tingling he felt in the tips of his fingers was because of the cold or from the ropes being tied too tight.

He flexed his fingers, opening and closing his hands into a fist to try and bring sensation back into his fingertips, but to no avail. They remained numb, and the cause of which eluded him.

Frowning, Billy stiffly sat up and began to pinch at his skin, belatedly realizing that the numbness was spreading slowly down the lengths of his fingers, a sensation that sent a chill running down the length of his spine.

"Oh," he said. "Oh shit."

The pain, when he finally did begin to feel it, started in his feet. There were still thirty minutes before the sun went down.

Billy licked his lips nervously as he tried to get his boots off, his numb fingers and bound hands fumbling uselessly with the laces as the pain centralized in his toes and grew in sudden intensity. He was no stranger to pain, but this was unlike anything he'd ever felt before: it was sharp and stabbing, with each throb of pain stemming from the bones in his toes, as though they were growing more pointed in an

attempt to pierce their way through his skin as they elongated. He could *feel* them cracking; each joint slowly popping free of itself as the bones began to push themselves forward.

"Oh, shit," he repeated, and could hear the muffled sounds of a laugh track from whatever sitcom Steve had turned on upstairs roaring in delight as he struggled to finally pull his boots off.

The stabbing sensation didn't relent, even once his shoes lay discarded by his feet. He peeled away his socks with shaking hands and stared down at his toes.

They'd turned a bright, beet red and were bulging like they might burst apart, his skin bubbling up around toenails that were already starting to peel off. He couldn't help the whimper as he tentatively felt them, a pain like touching a freshly popped, skinless blister causing him to draw his fingers back.

It was real. It was happening.

Sweating freely now, he reached away from his feet to brush his dampened hair away from his forehead as sweat rolled down the sides of his face. He paused when he felt his hair pull free from his scalp, clinging to the back of his hand stubbornly. Billy stared at the loose, curly strands with a horrified expression and reached up with a shaking hand to grab more. When he pulled, a handful of his hair came away easily, eliciting another whimper from deep within his throat. Disgusted and frightened, he threw his hair away to the floor.

Breathing quickly, he hastily rubbed his hands free of the loose strands in a panic and tried to calm himself. His whole body trembled as he breathed in deeply through his nose, wondering if he should try to call out to Steve to alert him that the worst case scenario was indeed unfolding. Another laugh track from upstairs came through the ceiling as he felt a sharp, sudden stab of pain in his ribs, prompting him to gasp loudly and curl forward over himself. He could actually *feel* some part of his ribcage shifting inside his torso as he tucked his arms in to his sides. Any lingering thoughts of trying to remain calm left him as he transitioned from panic to full on fear.

He stood up not knowing what he was going to do, but regretted it

instantly: as soon as he put weight on his foot, his ankle collapsed in on itself and brought him to the floor. A shout almost came out with his fall, but he managed to internalize the pain as he was used to doing and grit his teeth as his foot essentially broke itself in half.

The central part of his foot that arched snapped without warning. Billy swore loudly and reached for his foot instinctively, wanting to hold the break in place, but he couldn't bear the agony that came with the contact. Warm tears leaked from his eyes, and when his other lateral arch also split in half, he couldn't help but cry out.

From up above, the noises coming from the television ceased. Steve must have heard him and was listening for him now, trying to gauge whether or not he should intervene. Billy clenched his jaw tighter, determined to keep quiet, but gasped loudly when two of his molars gave out under the pressure, snapping to the side and coming loose of his gumline. The copper taste of blood filled his mouth as he spat the teeth out, shuddering uncontrollably when he felt the vertebrae in his spine begin to pop, one by one, pushing up against his skin that was quickly beginning to feel too tight.

Huffing in great breaths of air, he panted heavily as the bones of his toes finally pierced through his skin, causing most of the flesh surrounding them to burst open like little balloons. Blood splattered across the floor in gruesome, miniature arcs and Billy finally, finally became undone. He shrieked, unable to keep silent any longer as new appendages could be seen inside the flayed bits of bloody skin, slowly growing outward, already a part of him.

Warm tears of pain streaked down his face in thick lines as the skin of his feet continued to be ripped apart, making way for more muscle, new flesh. He wiped at his eyes helplessly and thought he could hear Steve's voice distantly calling out his name, asking if everything was alright.

He blinked, his vision blurred by the tears that would not clear away as he pulled himself over to the stairway.

Shaking wildly all over, Billy stretched out on the floor, realizing belatedly that the waistband of his jeans was growing tighter and tighter. Hissing sharply, he cursed himself for not having the

foresight to undress himself as he hastily tried to undo his belt. A pain similar to the initial agony he'd felt in his toes was beginning to manifest itself in his fingers as both of his hands slowly began to turn red, swelling up under the bonds of the rope as he fumbled with the buckle, desperately trying to get it to come free.

"Fuck!" he shouted in frustration, his clothing growing ever tighter as his body continued to bloat. He felt like he was being pinched in half with his belt acting as an unneeded tourniquet. "Fuck! Fuck!"

"Hey! Talk to me Hargrove, what's going on?"

Steve's worried voice trilled down through the cellar doors as he continued vocalizing his frustrations. Billy felt an organ in his abdomen shift out of place before popping, prompting him to groan and curl in on himself before he threw up. His couldn't undo his belt as his vision began to darken.

"Hargrove!" Steve shouted, banging a fist against the steel door. "What the hell's going on? Talk to me!"

"Fuck you!" Billy screamed, unable to articulate anything else as he tried to rub the blackness out of his eyes, but the more he pressed his fingers to them, they more they began to hurt.

A pressure was building up behind them the more he rubbed, and as it increased, his vision grew ever darker. He kept blinking, over and over, feeling his eyes bulge out of their sockets and against his eyelids, trying now to keep his eyeballs in place. He was hyperventilating when he finally went blind, the pressure behind his eyes becoming intolerable eyes before it finally came too much, and his eyes popped free.

He felt them slide out onto over his cheeks and onto the floor, the slimy, blood-slick nerves leaving tracks of blood on his face as he became totally and completely blind.

"No," he whispered to himself, retching again on the floor as he scrambled across the cement, trying to find the stairs, unable to see. "No, no! This isn't *real*!"

Beyond the cellar doors, Steve had his ear pressed against the slight crack between the panels, desperately trying to understand what was going on. He wasn't sure what to make of the noises he was hearing, unable to determine if Billy was just trying to mess with him or if he was in actual distress.

"Hargrove," he said impatiently, turning his head to try and peak in through the crack to get a glimpse of what was going on, "you *gotta* start talking to me, man; what the hell's going on down there?"

"I'm fucking blind," he heard Billy shout, his voice rife with fear. "I can't *see anything!*"

His voice was shaking as he spoke, and Steve knew then that whatever was happening was legitimate; Billy wasn't one to show weakness openly like that.

"Okay, stay calm," Steve stammered, but he wasn't sure if that was actually sound advice or not. "It's- it's going to be okay, okay?"

Billy howled, and Steve understood that the pain that carried with his voice must have been terrible to get him to shriek like that. He licked his lips anxiously, not knowing what support he could possibly offer him. He continuously opened and shut his mouth, words of encouragement dying on his tongue before he could manage to speak them.

And then, all at once, the cacophony of agony ceased.

Steve couldn't hear anything over the rapid sound of his breathing for a moment before he finally spoke: "Hargrove? Is... are you okay?"

"Hurts." Billy's voice, quiet, strained, and barely audible over the sounds of things (flesh, fabric) slowly tearing, sounded disconcertingly like he was speaking with a throat full of water. It was gargling and grotesque; completely unlike the smooth, honeyed voice he'd become known for.

"Okay, what, uh, what... what hurts?" Steve whispered in response, fear quieting his previously urgent tone.

"*Everything.*"

"Shit," Steve said to himself, backing away from the cellar door panels as the sounds of something large and heavy being knocked over made him jump. "Just, uh, stay calm," he said, though he wasn't sure if he was saying it to himself or Billy. From down below, he heard Billy groan loudly before going silent again.

Steve's heart was pounding as he hesitated, unsure of what to do. All the details of Billy's haphazardly concocted plan fled his mind as he tried to think back on what they'd agreed to do if something ended up happening, and his first instinct was to open the doors to go down and check on him. He looked at the chains wrapped tightly around the door handles and bit his lip before crouching down and pressing his eye to the crack.

The overhead light wasn't bright enough to reveal much, but at the base of the stairwell there was a small circle of illumination. Steve squinted, ignoring the cold of the steel as he pressed his face against the door, trying to see all that he could.

Blood stains. Torn bits of... *something* he couldn't quite make out. Dark masses on the stairwell; lots of evidence that pointed towards Billy transforming, but no trace of Billy himself.

"Hargrove," Steve whispered, and then shook his head to clear himself of his cowardice. "Hargrove," he said again, louder and with more emphasis, "dude, you *have* to talk me through what's happening down there."

He waited, unconsciously holding his breath as he waited for a reply. It was steadily growing darker as the sun slowly sank, making it all the harder to see into the cellar from the tiny slit. Frowning and unable to see anything, Steve turned his head and pressed his ear against the door. From somewhere in the depths of the cellar he could hear something breathing heavily. It was moving, too; he could hear something shuffling, moving around the floor space cautiously.

When he turned his head again to see through the crack, he caught a glimpse of something large and hulking cross under the light, tall enough to set the lightbulb swinging. He couldn't help but suck in a sharp breath of air, his lungs and throat burning with the sting of the cold weather. The thing- whatever *Billy* had become- halted just

outside the rim of light. Entranced, Steve found he couldn't move as it emitted a low, threatening growl that sounded more like a man impersonating a dog than an actual beast.

From his limited viewpoint, he couldn't see the way the muscles in its legs were tightening, or how it had begun to crouch; he didn't have time to react as it sprang forward, jumping up the stairs in a single leap to ram itself against the doors.

The chains held the doors shut, but the sudden impact smashed the metal against Steve's nose and soon all he could smell was blood as it drained out of his nostrils. He fell backwards, holding his nose as the Billy-creature growled again. Horrified, Steve could only sit in the snow and watch as the doors lurched forward when Billy rammed against them again, trying to escape. The second impact loosened the restraints, and all Steve could do in that moment was watch as they rattled uselessly in place, beginning to slip through the handles as they hadn't been properly locked into place.

Cursing to himself, staggered to his feet and rushed to grab the chains, but as Billy threw his body against the doors again it soon became obvious that even if the doors stayed shut, they were about to pop free of their hinges entirely. Blood dripped down over his lips and onto the metal panels as he tried to think of what he could possibly do to counteract the damage Billy had done. In an act of desperation, he threw himself against the steel and hoped that his added bodyweight would be enough to keep them in place.

If it managed to do anything, he couldn't tell. Almost immediately Billy was throwing himself against the doors again, nearly bucking Steve off.

"Stop!" Steve cried out, grasping for the chains to hold them in place. His fingers scrabbled against the cold steel links even as Billy let out another deep, throaty growl. With the doors as loose as they were, Steve was almost certain the doors wouldn't survive another body-slam. "Give it up, Hargrove!" Steve said again, desperately. "Just-fuck, Billy, *stop!*"

He braced himself for another impact, but it never came. Eyes closed in anticipation, Steve blinked them open and exhaled shakily, his

fingers trembling as he let the chains go. Crystalized air puffed out in front of his face over and over as he rolled off the doors and stood up unsteadily, trying to wipe away the blood that had already frozen over and turned to crust on his upper lip. Somehow, miraculously, his pleading had worked, but before he could take comfort in that fact, other disturbing sounds began to creep back up to him from down below.

Things were being tossed around; the metallic clang of old paint cans being bounced off the floors and walls mixed with the hoarse, angry vocalizations of the creature Billy had become made his blood run colder than the air currently was. The noises Billy was making were at once both animalistic and human, deep and throaty and more akin to the bellows of a moose than a man or wolf.

Steve stood in front of the cellar doors not knowing what to do. Already their plan was falling apart, and he was quickly becoming aware of how vastly unprepared he was to handle the situation. He wanted the security of the bat in his trunk, but didn't trust himself to leave the doors unattended for the length of time it would take him to run back inside and grab his keys to get it, but he felt so *weak* without it.

Another loud, crashing noise came from within and Steve stilled, listening intently. Faintly, he could hear Billy snuffling about, and after the sun finally completely descended, all was quiet. His nose was throbbing as he stood attentively, but when nothing more could be heard, his stomach sank.

With trembling hands and his mind screaming at him to stop, he knelt by the doors and slowly unwound the chains from the handles. The fact that he couldn't hear anything coming from within didn't sit well with him; he had to make sure Billy was still down there.

He tried to shift the chains as quietly as possible, but with how nervous he was, he had a hard time keeping his hands steady. They rattled noisily against the door, grating on his already frazzled nerves as they slid free. Heart pounding madly, Steve carefully pulled the doors open and took the first step down into the cellar.

It was silent. He couldn't hear anything as he hesitantly took a second

step, mentally berating himself over and over for being stupid enough to walk defenseless into the lion's mouth. He had no idea what Billy was capable of now, or if he'd even recognize him enough to (hopefully) have enough sense to not harm him. The lightbulb that dangled freely from the ceiling was swaying, throwing its light around erratically, showing him glimpses of the gore that lined the steps.

Eyes wide, Steve gagged at the sight of the flayed strips of bloodied skin that were splattered near everywhere. He had to avert his eyes as he took another step, making slow progress as he was careful not to step in any of the mess. At the bottom of the stairs he warily peered around the walls, hoping he'd only stuck his head into the lion's mouth figuratively. To his immediate relief, but long-term dismay, there was no trace of Billy to be seen in the space of the cellar.

Exhaling deeply, Steve tried to even out his breathing as he came to stand in the middle of the room, looking around to assess the damage. As the swinging lightbulb steadied, he turned towards where the shelf that was hiding the tunnel had been and found it on the ground, knocked to its side and several feet away from where it had originally been positioned. His shoulders drooped at the realization of Billy's escape.

He went and stood before the opening of the tunnel and felt all hope of remedying the situation vanish. A numbness overtook him as he recognized his responsibilities of keeping Billy captive had changed; he was the only one who knew about Billy's circumstances, and he was the only one who could do anything about it now. Distantly, and much further away than he would've liked, he could hear the muted, labored sounds of Billy's breathing as he escaped confinement through the underground system.

The burden of his responsibilities threatened to overwhelm him in that instant, but instead of letting himself be overtaken by despair, Steve took a deep, steady breath and rolled his shoulders back. He hesitated for only a minute before he took charge and ran in after him, disregarding his urgent need to turn back and get his bat out of the car. There was no time, he thought; no time to get a weapon, no time to get a flashlight. If Billy was now as the werewolf in the woods

was, then he was capable of speeds greater than Steve could muster, and every second mattered. If he lost his trail now, then it would be lost to him entirely. There was no time; he had to go now or he wouldn't go at all.

Alone and unarmed Steve ran, chasing after Billy into the dark, cold tunnel, hoping he would be able to catch him in time, and dreading the repercussions that would come if he couldn't.

11. Down in the Ground

RUN.

The further Steve traveled through the tunnel, blindly feeling his way along with one hand pressed against the crumbling wall, the more he became aware of how frightened he'd become. Terror the likes of which he hadn't felt since the first night he'd become involved with the horrors of the Upside Down was upon him, turning his legs into wobbly, unsteady messes that had already caused him to fall once. He could feel the warmth of his blood spoiling yet another one of his coats as he bled out into the sleeve, certain that he'd ruptured several of his stitches when he'd landed on his injured arm after his violent stumble.

It hurt terribly, but there was little more he could do about it other than grin and bear it. He hoped, rather bitterly, that werewolves weren't like sharks and couldn't somehow hone in on his fresh injury, but knowing Billy's capacity for being aware of hidden wounds, he couldn't really find a reason to believe why they wouldn't be.

Deep down in the ground, he was defenseless, bleeding, and blind. He felt vulnerable in ways he hadn't felt since he was a child, in the days when the scariest thing he'd had to face was the possibility of being jumped by monsters when he had to use the bathroom at night. Then, the darkness that his hallway contained had felt oppressive and overwhelming to his young psyche, but he hadn't known true darkness until now. It was deep and all-consuming, the long, narrow tunnel no longer illuminated by the preternatural glow that had once lit the way. His eyes could only barely pick out where he was, although there were times when the tunnel wall would branch away and upwards to an opening, where the dull evening light shone dimly in to help guide his way.

Billy was out there, somewhere, and if he hadn't already left the complicated system of tunnels then that meant that he was still down there somewhere *with* him, and not knowing if Billy had enough humanity left in him to recognize and not kill him on sight constantly had Steve second guessing his recklessness in following after him.

The slower pace he kept now at least allowed him time to listen for him, but Steve hadn't been able to hear anything more than the hollow sounds of the winds blowing above the ground, his heartbeat pounding rapidly within his chest, and... something else.

Steve paused and took a deep breath, trying to settle his nerves before he determinedly pressed on again.

He didn't want to think about what else he'd heard down there, in the dark. He wished now that he'd spent the five minutes it would've taken to get a flashlight before he gave chase, but he hadn't anticipated being so afraid.

"Stupid, so stupid," he muttered to himself, and in his mind he heard Nancy's voice chiding him, calling him an idiot for being so willfully careless.

Distantly, he could see another side tunnel coming up. A pale light shone on the decrepit floor ahead of him, and he hastened towards it. Snow was blowing in gently from the opening as Steve stepped outwards to see if any of the fresh snowfall had been disturbed, but it was fresh and unmarred. If Billy had come by here, he hadn't gone up. Holding his arm tenderly, he reluctantly crept back into the gloom and pressed onwards through the dark.

RUN.

HUNGER.

HUNT.

Looking back over his shoulder, Steve paused. He thought he'd heard something again, echoing up through the cavern from behind. He bit his lip and tried to focus, but no amount of squinting would allow his vision to permeate the darkness. All he *could* see were motionless swirls as his eyes tried to form recognizable shapes out of the emptiness. He held his breath and waited for the sound to come again, but it didn't. He exhaled a shaky breath and ran his hand nervously through his hair; what had it been? Something soft, trying not to have been heard at all. Something following him, trying to match its steps with his own.

He couldn't calm his heart from the rapid pace it was beating despite doing his best to remain calm about the situation. Dread the likes of which he'd never known flooded him as he stood there, wondering what he'd do if he *did* see something back there, and his hand clenched instinctively for the handle of the bat he'd stupidly neglected to carry with him. Was it possible Billy had hidden in a side tunnel, or even waited against the opposite wall, shrouded in darkness, for him to pass by in order to start hunting him? There was something back there, stalking him, but what it was eluded him. The thought that he was nothing more than a piece of shark bait, walking around and chumming the waters came to him again as he swallowed hard and tried to will his legs to continue forward.

They wouldn't move.

He turned his back against the wall and sank to the ground, fear momentarily overtaking him. All he wanted to do in that moment was scream in frustration; it wasn't supposed to have happened this way. Everything had gotten out of hand so fast he hadn't had time to properly process it all, and now he was blind and alone, lost, cold, and exposed in a tunnel he'd already almost died in once before.

What had he really expected to do, though, anyway? Even if he *found* Billy, there was a greater chance he'd end up getting mauled by him than there was of him actually doing anything to help.

There were so many things they should've done differently; they should've bought a lock to keep the chains in place, they should've come up with a plan b for if Billy escaped, they should've accounted for-

In the midst of his self-pity, he heard, again, a sound come from somewhere behind him: a soft, quiet inhalation of air, too intentional to be the wind. His blood ran cold as his heart began to beat harder, and although he didn't want to, he slowly rose from his spot on the ground and looked back the way he'd come with his back braced against the wall.

There was still nothing to be seen.

'*Just an animal*', he thought to himself, breathing in faster than he

ought to have been. As he stared into the dark, he thought, perhaps, that he could see something moving in the blackness but couldn't be sure that it wasn't his brain trying to make sense of something it couldn't see. He swallowed hard and utilized the spike in adrenaline to get his legs moving again in order to hasten onwards through the tunnel. *'It's just an animal that got lost down here, that's all. A deer, or something. Coyote, maybe. Wolf.'*

Goosebumps broke out across his skin as he tried to work himself into a jog. There, again, he could hear it. A footfall, soft, quiet, and out of sync with his own. Something down the way he'd come, sneaking after him. *Hunting him.*

"Just an animal," he whispered to himself, over and over like a mantra, trying to find peace in his own words.

A slight noise came to him then, like a quiet huff of laughter, and he knew that he was wrong.

Steve took off into a panicked sprint, the uneven ground almost causing him to stumble again as he ran forward carelessly. He couldn't hear anything over the labored sounds of his own breathing and the rush of blood pumping in his ears, but up ahead he could see another pale beam of light cutting through the darkness. He ran towards it desperately like a parched man racing towards an oasis in the desert, and the irony that he was running *towards* the light at the end of the tunnel evaded him.

The passage that branched out from the side was steeper than he'd judged it to be as he ran, and as he turned into it, running up the slope a small ways, he slipped on the snow and fell back a few feet. He gasped in alarm as he slid back into the dark opening, falling forward onto his hands and knees as he clambered out, plunging his hands into the frigid cold, grasping for the soil, not minding how badly his arm was hurting in the process.

It felt like an eternity before he was able to escape, but in actuality only a few, frantic seconds had passed by the time he was able to make it up the slope of the bank. He jerked upright, caught a stitch in his side, and turned to face whatever had followed him down the length of the tunnel. As he held a hand to his side, breathing hard,

Steve stared into the open maw of the cavern opening and saw-
Nothing.

Panic dwindling, he looked around confusedly. He *had* heard something down there with him, hadn't he? Or had the intense darkness mixed with his fear to create a paranoia too thick to shake off? He couldn't say, but either way, it didn't seem like anything was with him there now. Still, he did not feel entirely at ease; he had no idea where he was.

As he allowed time for the cramp in his side to ease up, he took a look around himself to see if he could find any identifying landmarks. Despite the fact that the light of the full moon was being heavily Obscured by Clouds and a brisk snowfall, Steve had no trouble seeing that he'd wound up in some forested area, but couldn't find anything familiar enough for him to pinpoint his location. How far he'd traveled since leaving the safety of Dustin's cellar was unknown to him, but as he looked about the area, he could hear the yips and howls of some hunting dogs somewhere in the distance.

Far enough away from the suburbs for people to be out hunting, at least.

Steve turned in place for a moment, trying to come up with a plan of action when he noticed that his tracks were not the only ones that had marred the fresh snowfall: he could see long, animalistic footprints leading out of the tunnel and away into the woods. A feeling of relief settled into the pit of his stomach when he realized that he was, at the very least, on the right track. Feeling more winded than he would have liked to admit, Steve ignored the cold in his feet and started walking, following the marks into the woods.

Every few steps he'd turn around and look over his shoulder to be sure he wasn't being followed, unable to completely shake that terrible sensation of being stalked in the dark. There was never anything to be seen as he wandered, keeping a careful eye to the ground and listening to the echoing sounds of the hunting dogs through the trees, his wounded arm kept stiff by his side. He was just beginning to think that maybe things wouldn't turn out quite as badly as he'd initially feared they would when he heard the sharp crack of a

rifle being shot.

The dogs he'd been listening to were closer now, and yowling madly as a second shot followed up the first, but the ecstasy of the hounds was cut short. Frozen in place, Steve heard their eager howls turn into yips of terror, and distantly he could hear the unmistakable howl of something not quite human, but not quite *not*.

PREY.

HUNT.

FEAST.

Steve could hear voices ahead, shouting loudly in confusion and then alarm.

"Shit," he breathed to himself as he started into another sprint, stumbling through the thick snow as hurriedly as he could manage, but he wasn't wearing the right sort of shoes for it.

The voices that at first had begun to sound closer began to fade as he ran along, vocalizing distress while they called out to their dogs and to each other as they fled whatever monstrosity they'd accidentally come upon.

Snow was falling heavily around him as he pursued the commotion, obscuring his vision as he tried to follow the tracks Billy had left behind. He was forced to slow his pace down as the snowflakes stuck in his eyelashes, hindering him as he tried to navigate his way around the thick trunks of the trees. His toes were going numb in his dampening sneakers as he plodded forward, unaware of where he was heading until he finally came across what had scared the hunters away. He stalled when he saw the dark shape up ahead, barely discernible in the low lighting and the violent snow flurry, hunched over something half-buried in the snow.

From where he stood, Steve could hear the sounds of something crunching and squelching grotesquely as the form shook its head side to side in short, quick bursts, tearing a limb away from the body of whatever it was feeding upon. Steve was rendered immobile by the

sight, and although it was hard to see, he could tell that what he was looking at was none other than Billy transformed.

Even with his body hunched over what he'd caught, (and Steve hoped desperately that it wasn't a person), there were notable differences in the physiology between what Billy had become and the thing that was responsible for that change; where the thing that had attacked them before had been long, sinewy, and nothing but terrifyingly long limbs, the creature before him looked to be made out of pure muscle.

Billy was *massive*; even with most of his form submerged in the nighttime shade, Steve could see how bulked out his body had become with the change. Steve felt hopeless in his presence, and turned away as the Billy-thing chucked the disembodied limb aside and began eating from the carcass in earnest. He slid out of site and kept his back pressed up against the broad trunk of a tree, desperately trying to think of what he was supposed to do now.

Was he meant to try and lead him back into the confines of Dustin's cellar like he'd tried to do with Dart before? If he offered himself as bait, would Billy even take it, and how far could he reasonably get with a beast like that chasing him down? He sighed miserably and closed his eyes, listening to the wet, sloppy sounds of Billy feasting on whatever- or *whoever*- he'd managed to catch. He winced at every crunch of bone that met his ears and wondered how the hell he was going to fix this.

He opened his eyes and tentatively peaked around the safety of his tree, monitoring Billy's progress as he devoured the corpse. At the very least, he could probably try to tail him; that way, he'd be able to at least know where he went and keep tabs on what he did until the sun rose and returned his sentience to him. But that would take all night, and Steve was already exhausted from his adventure in the tunnel. The only thing keeping him going at this point was fear and adrenaline, one of which he had only a limited supply of.

As he ducked back into position behind the tree, he locked eyes with a face and nearly screamed.

The man- '*It's Hopper*', he realized belatedly- moved fast and forced a hand over his mouth to muffle his loud gasp of surprise.

'Shh,' Hopper mouthed quietly, eyes wide as they darted from the look of fright on Steve's face to Billy, too preoccupied with eating to notice anything else. He looked back to Steve and raised his brows, asking him silently if he was okay enough to not scream as soon as he took his hand away. Steve nodded, and Hopper dropped his hand.

Steve was panting, open-mouthed with fright as he leaned over and rested his hands on his knees. His body shook all over, trembling with fear he couldn't suppress. He felt Hopper grip his shoulder in support and looked up to meet his eye.

"Oh *Jesus*- What are you doing out here?" he whispered hoarsely, voice barely rising above the sound of the snow falling on the ground. Steve had never been so scared, and couldn't keep his voice from breaking as he talked. "How did- how did you know where-"

Hopper's eyes glanced from Steve and away to where Billy was again, still crouched over before he replied, speaking slowly. "I was following a lead," he said, not quite able to pitch his voice as lowly as Steve had managed. "What are *you* doing out here?"

But Steve couldn't reply. Rather than speak, he shook his head and ducked his head back down, afraid he might end up puking if he opened his mouth again.

"Don't," Hopper quietly commanded, putting a hand to Steve's back to try and soothe him. "You'll alert it."

Choking back a harsh sob, Steve swallowed hard and managed to stand upright, though his body hadn't quite stopped shaking.

"I didn't mean to scare you, but I couldn't call out to you," Hopper explained, speaking slowly and deliberately, making stern eye contact with Steve who could only manage a feeble nod in response. He waited a moment for Steve to catch his breath before asking, "That's it, right? The thing that got you before?"

He jerked his head in the direction of Billy, and Steve was numbly aware that Hopper had placed a hand over his gun, moving to take it out of his holster slowly.

"Wait," Steve said as Hopper stepped away to get a better look at the creature Billy had become. Panic blossomed in his chest, born from the need to keep Billy relatively unharmed; he'd trusted him to do that much. "That's not- *Don't* shoot him."

"Him?" Hopper paused and turned back to Steve, gun drawn but angled towards the ground. His face was drawn tight, a mixture of confusion marred with disappointment spreading across his features. "*Him*," he repeated, and this time there was anger tinging the inflection of his voice.

"It's not what you think," Steve stressed, hardly aware of the rising pitch his voice was taking as he struggled to convey to Hopper that the situation was not what he thought it was. He couldn't let him think that he and Billy had somehow orchestrated the whole incident in the woods as some kind of hoax in order to fuck with him; they needed him on their side. Trust had to be based in trust, and if Hopper's perception of him was already being built on the assumption that he was a liar and a trickster, then it wouldn't bode well for them in the future. "It's *complicated*; we *were* attacked, before, but that out there- that's not- there's *another one*-"

"Keep your voice down," Hopper hissed urgently, and they both realized at the same time that the sloppy sounds of consumption had ceased in the midst of his babbling.

Wide-eyed, Steve looked to Hopper in alarm. A heavy silence hung in the air for the moment where neither of them reacted, until the sounds of snow crunching under the feet of something heavy coming towards them drove Steve to act.

"Don't shoot him," he said, looking Hopper in the eye as he tried to channel the last of his courage. His body was still shaking as he tried to tap into it, but if there was any courage left in him, it was making itself scarce. "Stay hidden, run when you can," he added, swallowing hard, and before Hopper could react, he dashed away from their position behind the tree to meet the beast Billy had become directly.

"Wait! *Steve!*" Hopper cursed and made to follow after him, but was stunned into immobility with what he saw when he rounded the tree. He shrunk back against the bark involuntarily at the sight of the tall,

hulking form that towered over the Harrington boy, dripping blood and looking oh so hungry.

Ignoring every alarm that was ringing in his head to turn tail and run, Steve stood very, very still, staring up into the grotesquely animalistic features Billy's face had morphed into. Blood was dripping freely from his mouth and down the length of his throat, lips drawn back into a snarl exposing all his pointy new teeth. A low growl was rumbling out of his mostly furless chest, growing louder as Steve tentatively began to raise his hand that held the invisible wound.

Steve licked his lips anxiously before he spoke, saying, "It's just me, Hargrove. Don't- no need to cream your pants here."

He laughed nervously, hoping that his callback to a familiar dialogue would somehow be enough to trigger some kind of recognition, but Steve found no hint of familiarity in Billy's bright, yellow-blue eyes. They glinted with barely restrained madness as Billy snarled and snapped his jaw angrily, strips of unidentifiable flesh stuck hanging in his teeth. What little courage Steve had managed to draw upon to face him was quickly leaving him, but still he stood strong, his feet frozen in place. In the back of his mind, Steve began to wonder if that wasn't because of the onset of frostbite.

There were less than five feet between them- an easy distance for Billy to gap, and yet, he hadn't. Despite all the aggression he was displaying, he hadn't yet made a move to attack, an observation that Steve struggled to make sense of.

"Steve."

Hopper's voice, a hoarse whisper behind him, went as unheeded as the wind blowing by them.

"It's just me," he said, addressing Billy and raising up his marked hand to him again, hoping that it might spark a less aggressive reaction this time. Billy gnashed his teeth and set his lips back into a deeper snarl in response, startling Steve into taking a step backwards. He lowered his hand helplessly, watching as the muscles in Billy's legs coiled tight, his whole body tensing as he lowered into a crouch, readying himself to spring.

He was going to die. Steve's eyelids fluttered at the realization; it didn't matter if his toes were frostbitten if he was just going to get eaten in the end. Taking a deep breath, Steve felt some of his panic ebbing away with the inevitability of it all, nowhere left for him to hide that Billy couldn't chase him down to kill. The second he turned his back, he was sure Billy was going to pounce.

"Steve!"

Drawn out of his pre-death introspection, Steve twitched, blinked, and turned to face Hopper, the start of an apology on the tip of his tongue, words he wanted to share to let him know that he hadn't really expected this to end well for him anyway, and froze when he finally saw what Hopper had been urgently trying to get him to see.

A shadow- long, thin, but spawned from nothing, had been creeping along the ground towards him. It was indented into the snow, a deep void pressed flat against the stark whiteness of the frost that was moving so slowly, it didn't appear to be moving at all. The *other one*, still trying to reach him, one long, skinny hand stretched forward to claim its prey at last.

When it saw that Steve had finally noticed it, it grinned, red eyes blazing.

Several things happened at once in that instance. At the same time he heard Hopper cocking his gun and yelling for him to move, he felt the warm, hot hand of Billy grab him by the shoulder. Long, sharp claws pierced through the fabric of his layers of clothing and inches deep into his skin, and as the first werewolf began to rise, Billy's grip over him tightened and Steve felt himself being thrown violently backwards. Bellowing out a deafening roar, Billy sprung forward with the momentum to meet the creature, red spittle flaring out of his mouth as he was met with tooth and claw.

Steve's feet left the ground as he was flung aside, his back colliding with a sturdy tree that pushed all the air out of his lungs. He gasped, wheezing for air as the edges of his vision blackened for a precarious moment. He coughed and struggled to breathe as Hopper ran towards him, slipping in the snow before frantically trying to help Steve to his feet. Steve stood, but wavered in place as he continued to struggle to

get air in, not quite able to fully comprehend what was happening around him.

"We have to go," Hopper said, trying to hustle a dazed Steve away from the terror taking place. "We have to go *now*; can you run? Walk?"

"Yeah, yeah, I can-" he began to say, and although Hopper had faced him away from it, Steve could hear Billy fighting the other creature. Savage, wet sounds reached his ears as the two beasts tore into each other viciously. "I can't leave him," Steve gasped out, turning away from Hopper who, this time, did not let him get away. "I can't leave him!"

"You are *hurt*," Hopper stressed, dragging Steve away through the snow with a strong arm wrapped around his waist. "You're not dressed for the weather and you. Are. *Hurt*. Whatever that *thing* is, you can't help it; we have to go *now*!"

Steve struggled uselessly, watching aghast as Billy was tackled into the snow, the head of the other werewolf bearing down on him to tear at his chest.

"Billy!" Steve shrieked as Billy unleashed a horrible howl of agony.

The first beast almost sounded like it was laughing as it tore into him, blood and flesh being slung into the air before Billy was able to kick him off, using the enhanced muscles in his legs to propel it backwards. It flew away from him, much in the same way Steve had been launched before, but Billy didn't allow it time to recover. He sprung after it immediately, pouncing atop of it and grabbing it with his jaw by the shoulder.

Steve watched, wide-eyed and horrified as Billy pulled it up and ran, dragging it away further into the woods and away from them.

"We've got to go after them," Steve said, sound frantic as he struggled to give chase. Hopper didn't listen, nor did he give Steve any slack to escape.

"We have to go," he growled out as he pinched Steve to his side,

veering them away from the direction Billy had dragged the other werewolf.

Steve tried one last time to pull himself free from Hopper's iron grasp before giving up, letting himself be led out of the woods to the road where Hopper had parked his truck. He couldn't tell if he was shaking from the cold or from the possibility that Billy could die or already *be* dead. He'd trusted Steve to keep him contained, and instead of doing his job he'd let him go.

"You are going to explain everything to me," Hopper said, his voice gruff as he opened the passenger door and all but shoved Steve into the seat, "and when I say 'everything', I mean *everything*."

As he slammed the door shut, Steve sat numbly in his seat and watched as Hopper walked around the front of the truck to get in on the driver's side. With the engine started, Hopper turned the air on to the hottest setting before shifting into gear and driving them away.

"Don't take me to the hospital," Steve said once he'd found his voice, but it felt rough and wrong in his throat. His eyes were wide and practically glued to the window, unable to tear his gaze away from the woods they were speeding past, hoping to catch some glimpse of Billy or the other one.

Hopper side-eyed him tensely, frowning at the request.

"You're hurt," he said simply. "Your arm is bleeding."

"It's just some torn stitches; it's not bad. I'll go tomorrow." He turned in his seat to face Hopper finally, desperation creasing his forehead and making him look far older than he was. "First thing tomorrow, I swear I'll go, but you have to take me back to Dustin's house tonight."

Hopper's frown deepened. "Why?" he asked slowly, mistrust lining the tone of his voice.

Steve struggled to find the words he needed to explain their situation, unsure of how much Hopper would be willing to believe and how much he was allowed to tell. In the end he wound up disclosing everything, leaving it to Hopper's discretion to choose what he would

take seriously and what he'd find too outrageous to believe. He told him everything, about their hastily thought out plan to the minimal amount of research they'd done on Billy's condition and how Steve himself hadn't even believed it at first.

Hopper remained quiet and impassive as he listened to all that Steve had to say. His face betrayed no emotion on whether he thought Steve was lying to him or not; he merely took it in, acting as a sponge as he was relayed all that Steve knew.

In the end, Hopper didn't take him to the hospital. He drove Steve back to Dustin's house as was requested of him, wherein he was able to see the evidence that fortified Steve's words. The gore of Billy's shed skin that was left in the basement seemed enough to solidify his thoughts on the matter.

"That thing out there- the one we saw together- you're telling me *that* was Billy Hargrove?"

Hopper looked at the hair that lay in clumps on the floor, noting from the colour and the curls that it was Billy's.

"Yeah," Steve affirmed, curling his toes in his wet shoes. He could feel them moving, but they still felt disturbingly numb. "I think I might have frostbite in my feet," he added offhandedly, trying to sound casual about the prospect.

Hopper gave him an alarmed look that suggested he felt he should have taken him to a hospital after all.

"Let's go inside; I'll take a look," Hopper said, sounding hesitant as he gestured towards the stairwell, "but if they look bad enough, then I *am* taking you to a doctor. Frostbite is serious."

"That's fair."

They climbed the cellar steps quietly, and each step Steve took was painful. Hopper made him sit at the kitchen table once they were inside and then knelt down, peeling off his sneakers and damp socks and laying them out on the linoleum flooring with a wet plop. Steve watched nervously, afraid for his own wellbeing for the first

time that night as Hopper appraised his feet, looking at his toes carefully.

The skin, mercifully, wasn't dark or black, but looked waxy and unnaturally pale. They felt stiff whenever Steve tried to move them.

"You're right," Hopper said with a sigh eventually, causing Steve's stomach to drop uncomfortably. "Mild. Treatable here, but still frostbite. Do you know where the bathroom is?"

Steve shook his head as Hopper came to a stand and looked around awkwardly, uncomfortable at the prospect of having to look for it in a home he hadn't properly been invited into. "Stay here," he said after a moment, as if Steve had plans to run back out into the wilderness to look for Billy on frostbitten feet.

He watched wordlessly as Hopper left the kitchen, wandering down the halls of the Henderson household to look for a bathroom. After a few minutes, during which Tews had come in to keep him company, Steve heard the sound of a faucet turning on and water being drawn into a bathtub. Seconds later and Hopper was back in the kitchen, holding out his hand for Steve to take.

Hobbling to his feet, Steve used Hopper's arm for support as they slowly made their way into Dustin's mom's bedroom and then into the master bathroom, where Hopper had indeed begun drawing a bath. He helped Steve sit on the rim of the tub, knocking over a few of Dustin's mom's bottles of soaps in the process as he checked the temperature of the water.

"Your skin needs to thaw. Keep your feet in the water until you can feel your toes again and then wrap them up with whatever you can find," Hopper explained as Steve began to roll up his pants legs. He was aware of the chief's eyes on him as he hesitantly shifted in place to bring his legs up and over the rim, hovering his feet above the water, afraid that it would hurt once they breached the surface. "If the skin doesn't turn red in half an hour call someone that can bring you to the ER. Okay?"

"Got it."

"If you don't regain feeling in half an hour, you call someone or you'll lose your toes; do you understand me?"

"Yeah."

Steve slowly let his feet sink into the water then, wondering what he would do if it came to that. He wouldn't be able to play basketball anymore if he lost them all, probably. When the water met his skin, there was no pain.

"What are you going to do?" he asked after a long moment, turning up to look at Hopper, his concern wavering from potentially losing his toes to wondering where Billy was and if he was alright.

Hopper didn't answer right away, and when he did his voice sounded heavy and tired.

"If that thing has what you say is the Hargrove boy, I suppose it's my duty to go back out and try and find them." He sighed deeply and rubbed a hand down his face. "You sure he'll... be normal, come sunrise?"

Steve nodded; he was pretty sure that was the case, at any rate—everything else they'd hypothesized had thus far been proven true.

"And you're sure he'll come back here when he does?"

"If he can," Steve replied. *'If he's alive,'* Steve thought.

Hopper sighed again and nodded once to himself. "Alright," he said. "I'm going to leave, then. If he comes back before I can find him, you call the station and tell them to radio me to tell me you found your dog that got loose, you understand? And I'm serious about your feet; don't feel like you have to stay here and wait for him if your toes don't regain feeling."

"Alright, alright, I heard you the first time," Steve snapped, flexing his toes in the warm water irritably. It might have just been wishful thinking, but he believed that he could feel some sensation returning to his feet. "Don't let him or the other one bite you, if you do find them," he said, letting his misplaced frustrations go with a slackening of his shoulders. "Don't- don't let him die."

"I'll do what I can, kid."

And then Hopper was gone, leaving Steve to sit alone with his frozen feet dangling in the warmth of the water. His eyes began to water with shame and anger as he sat there, but he rubbed the tears away hastily before he could devolve into hysterics. He felt cowardly and like a disappointment, but it was all out of his hands now. If Billy survived the night it wouldn't be because of him, or anything he did, but if he died...

If he died, then it would be.

12. Stonethrower

Johnathan woke up slowly, tangled in his bedding and hardly able to open his eyes. He stared out into the dark corner of his room, trying to pinpoint what exactly had woken him up before turning his head slightly to glance at the digital display of his bedside clock. The bright red numbers glared at him, displaying an hour that was far too early for his liking. He sighed deeply to himself and tried to go back to sleep, closing his eyes and rolling over onto his side.

As he shrugged his blankets back up tightly around his shoulders, trying to find that comfortable sweet spot, he realized from the pressure on his bladder that he'd woken up because he had to piss. Johnathan groaned in frustration and lay there for one stubborn, uncomfortable moment before resigning himself to getting up.

His coordination suffered with how tired he was as he got up out of bed and stumbled out of his room, tripping over his shoes when he got to the hall. Rubbing his eyes as he passed by Will's room, he didn't notice that the door to his brother's bedroom was open and continued towards the bathroom unawares.

He relieved himself without turning the bathroom light on, unwilling to chase away what remained of his sleepiness by turning it on. Once finished, he flushed and tucked himself back into his underwear hastily, scratching at his stomach as he shuffled back into the hall, more awake now than he'd have liked to have been. There was nothing more he wanted in that moment than to get back in bed and wrap himself into a warm cocoon, but as he approached Will's bedroom it became impossible for him to miss the fact that his door was open, and that a cold wind was steadily blowing through it.

It was the cold that had Johnathan's stomach curling uneasily as he hesitated by the open door, looking into Will's room uncertainly.

The window along the back wall of his room was open wide, allowing the cold, hard-blowing wind to sweep in snow as it passed by. An empty howling noise accompanied the wind as it scraped along the sides of the house and flew in through the opening. Will was standing in front of it, his comforter wrapped around his

shoulders tightly as he turned from where he'd been staring out the open window to look at his brother, a desperately frightened look in his eye that glimmered even in the dark.

"Will?" Johnathan asked hesitantly, crossing his arms across his chest to keep himself warm as he wandered closer towards the open window. His heart was pounding hard and fast, already afraid of what Will was going to say. "What're you doing? Why is the window open?"

Will didn't say anything at first. He turned sharply away from where Johnathan was carefully watching him, his breath coming in quick bursts that skirted the edges of hyperventilation as he tried to summon the courage he needed to speak.

"Nothing," Will said after one long moment. He freed one of his arms from his blanket robe and closed the window abruptly, snapping it shut quickly before stepping back to his bedside, still bundled tightly in the warmth of his comforter. "I thought I heard something outside, is all."

Johnathan looked towards the window as Will climbed back into bed, as though he'd be able to see what his brother had thought he'd seen. "Heard something like what?" Johnathan asked eventually, speaking slowly in an effort to be mindful, artfully dodging the questions he really wanted to ask: *is it him? Is he back?*

In bed, Will shrugged easily, but something about the way he held his blankets tightly around him made him look small and insecure; even his eyes still looked wary and afraid. "I dunno. It sounded like some dogs fighting, I think. They were coming close, but it's quiet now and I couldn't see anything when I looked."

"Some dogs?" It wasn't that he mistrusted Will, but Johnathan was well aware of his brother's penchant for withholding information when he thought it might put his family at risk. "Are you sure that was all it was? You'd tell me if there was more to it, right?"

"Yeah," Will said softly. His attention had been focused on his window, but he turned it towards Johnathan with a reassuring smile. "Yeah, of course I would; the noises just reminded me of Chester, is

all. I miss him."

A bitter smile graced Johnathan's lips at the mention of their late dog.

"Yeah, me too," he said after a quiet moment of reflection. "He was a good dog, but if you hear them out there again, let me know and I'll take a look, alright?"

"Okay," Will said, letting his gaze drift back to the window. Johnathan followed it uncertainly before remembering how tired he was and how cold his bed was getting without him in it.

"Goodnight, Will," he said as he turned away, closing the bedroom door quietly behind him as he left.

"Night, Johnathan," Will replied with a whisper.

The ringing of the telephone mounted on the kitchen wall sounded more like an angry alarm clock than it did a phone as it rattled insistently in its cradle. The loud, abrupt noise it made carried strongly into the living room, blaring its alarm as loudly and determinedly as it could, unheeding of whomever might've been trying to sleep through it. And Steve did manage to sleep through it, exhausted as he was, paying it no attention as he sighed and ignored the ringing tones that began to seep into the dream he was having. The kitchen phone rung dutifully regardless, announcing the call as loudly as it could before it eventually tapered off unanswered, and a welcoming silence took hold for one strong minute before it began to ring again, and this time it was strong enough to wake Steve with a start.

His body jerked in surprise as he was unceremoniously brought into wakefulness, the shock of the phone's persistent ringing causing him to draw in a deep breath of air as he lifted his head up from out of the deep, cushioned crevice of the sofa he'd fallen asleep on. The lingering remnants of his dream mixed with his waking memory, muddying it to the point where he couldn't immediately recognize where he was as he rolled over onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. The thought that he was late for school and had somehow

slept through his alarm worried itself into his mind as the phone continued to ring unanswered. If he got written up for showing up late to first period *again*, then his dad was gonna really have his ass for it this time.

Steve quickly moved into a sitting position and winced as the injury on his arm protested painfully against his sudden movements. He ignored the intense throbbing, unaware of how misplaced his concerns were, as, in a manner that could be likened to Alice's white rabbit, he stood up and hurried into the kitchen on curiously sore feet, slipping in too-small borrowed socks across the linoleum tile and worried only about the time. The little creature's mantra of 'I'm late, I'm late, I'm *late*' circulated through his thoughts relentlessly as he stupidly went to answer the phone in a misguided attempt to turn off the alarm.

He slapped the receiver off the arms of its cradle, ending its terrible noisemaking mid-ring. Relieved, he stood staring at the curved piece of plastic as it dangled limply by its cord, swaying against the backdrop of unfamiliar wallpaper like the pendulum of some grandfather clock.

"Hello? Anyone home? Hel-loooo?"

A voice, tinny and hardly audible started speaking through the receiver. The voice registered as being somewhat familiar to him, perforating the sleepy haze clouding his mind as he tried to bring his thoughts into focus; God knew he'd never been a morning person. Hesitantly, Steve reached out to take hold of the phone receiver and put it to his ear, looking around himself doubtfully as he did so to orient himself, when, as he caught sight of the kitchen table he'd stayed up all night sitting at, it all came back to him rather suddenly.

He hadn't stayed overnight in some stranger's house, and he certainly wasn't late for school: he was standing in the Henderson's kitchen, wearing two pairs of Dustin's socks he'd had to stretch out to fit over his feet, which had somehow, miraculously, not given themselves over to frostbite in the night. Bright, early morning sunshine was flooding in through the kitchen windows, reflecting too harshly over the freshly fallen snow outside for him to look out at for too long. He squinted and turned away from the glare, unsure of what to do now

that he'd actually answered the call.

"Uh," he said into the phone smartly as he continued to stare around himself, still mildly caught in the throes of sleepy bewilderment. A small part of his brain was still trying to convince him that he was late for school and he ought to be hurrying on. "Uh, Hen- Henderson household?"

"There you are! Finally, geeze, Mike, did you plan on sleeping all day?"

Dustin's voice, clear but confusing in its purpose, came in from the other end of the line.

"Whoa, bud, I think you have the wrong number; this is *your* house, not Mike's," Steve replied after a moment, fixing the receiver between the crook of his neck and shoulder. He balanced it there precariously as he went to roll up the sleeve of his shirt tenderly, trying to get a good look at the wound that was painfully making itself remembered.

He had to cock his head at an awkward angle to get a good look at it. The long, not-yet-healed gash that had had its stitches popped was coated in dried, flakey blood, but didn't look as bad as it felt in Steve's opinion. There were a few busted stitches he could see that would have to be tended to, but they didn't *look* like they were in need of urgent care, and although he'd promised Hopper he'd go to the hospital first thing after the night was over, he felt it could probably wait a while longer. He rolled his sleeve back down and took the receiver in hand.

"Haha, yeah, I know man," Dustin's voice continued, his cheery tone sounding fake despite his words. *"Look, Mike, I just wanted to let you know that I'll be back in time for DnD today after all-"*

"Dustin, dude, are you even listening to me? I'm not Mike, you called *your own house-*" Steve said, sighing in frustration.

"Yeah, trust me, I know." The tone of Dustin's voice became sterner and more pointed amidst the voices Steve could hear casually conversing in the background. Sudden understanding dawned on Steve's sleepy face when he realized Dustin wasn't being an idiot, but was attempting to speak to him in code. *"SO, yeah, don't worry about*

trying to incorporate my character without me, I'll be home by eleven."

"Eleven?" Steve turned around in place, trying to find a clock to give him the current time, forgetting that he had a watch currently strapped to his wrist. He found one mounted on the far wall that marked the hour at being just a little past 9:45. "Shit," he breathed out lowly to himself, turning back to the wall the phone was mounted on. He leaned up against it, trying to think of what to do and how to respond.

The cellar was a mess; from the poor, dimly lit glimpses he'd gotten of it the previous night he'd recognized it to be effectively trashed. The gore that had come from Billy's transformation was splattered all over the walls and floor. With the knowledge that he could barely keep his own room clean, Steve knew that there was no way in hell he'd be able to clean it all out in an hour, on his own, while also trying to figure out where Billy had gone.

He brought the inside of his lip between his teeth and chewed on it lightly, tugging at a piece chapped skin that had cracked and was peeling up, his gaze wandering about the room and to the windows again as he tried to come up with a suitable plan of action. His eyes lingered on the snow outside, adjusting to the refracting light as he weighed out his options.

"So are we still on to play?" Dustin asked, his voice interrupting Steve's concentration. *"Should I call the rest of the party and let them know?"*

"What?" Steve blinked and turned his focus away from the window, but as he turned away he noticed something he hadn't before. Squinting, he turned to look back outside and frowned, trying to figure out what it was that had stood out to him. "Uh, no?"

"Why not? You said earlier this week that the next session was going to be an important one!"

"Oh my god, your code language is confusing the hell out of me, Henderson. Look, I know you can't speak frankly wherever you are, but if you're asking to get something done today I- I can't yet," Steve said, and sighed heavily again. He knew he owed Dustin an explanation- had promised him one, in fact- but he couldn't find the

words to do it currently. He was hurt, sore, tired, and still had so much left to do that he couldn't allocate enough energy into trying to formulate the response he owed. "Listen, not today, man, but tomorrow, alright? 'Call the party' and assemble the rest of the nerds to set up a meeting for tomorrow or something."

The silence on the other end of the line was welcoming. The voices that had been talking in the background were still hardly audible as Dustin took his time thinking over Steve's request, granting him the time to focus on the snow.

It was fresh and thick and spread across the ground tantalizingly, practically begging for some kid to come along and roll a snowman out of it. But despite how serene it appeared, there was something off about it; something so subtle Steve couldn't quite perceive what it was, but still he could tell that there was something there he was missing. He wiped away whatever sleep was left in his eyes and squinted harder, despite the way the sunshine that glimmered across the surface negatively impacted his vision.

"Okay, fine, but I'd like to remind whoever else may be listening that we are proud of our interests and refuse to wear the moniker of 'nerd' with shame," Dustin said testily in response.

"Yeah, okay, whatever; that's cool, man," Steve mumbled. "I'm glad you're proud of your little nerd interests." He was starting to develop a headache as he stared, watching the way the natural lighting changed as the cloud coverage shifted and moved. The snow became less bright, and the shadows deepened as the clouds traveled slowly by, and suddenly Steve realized what it was that had stood out as peculiar to him.

It was disturbed. What should have been a fresh, even coating of snow was *disturbed*. He hadn't been able to see it properly until the shadows had been emphasized, but there was a clear path there that he could see now that indicated *something* had come through the backyard, leading straight to the cellar opening. Any remnants of exhaustion that lingered still in Steve's body was replaced with a sharp spike in adrenaline.

"Okay, okay cool yeah, look, I gotta go," Steve said hurriedly, unsure

of when exactly he'd tangled himself in the phone's curly cord. "Just, radio me later, or something, uh, we'll get this all sorted out, and listen seriously for a minute here: do not, I repeat, do *not* let your mom go anywhere near your basement alright? It's fucked up, but I'll take care of it later; I gotta go *now*, we'll debate the politics of what being a nerd does to your street cred later."

"Wait, wait!" Dustin exclaimed, and Steve only obliged him because he had yet to unwind himself completely from the phone's deceptively long cord. *"At least give me a hint for the session; is it- is it a 'code red' kind of thing we're going to be dealing with here? I wanna know what spells I ought to prepare, you owe me that much of a hint at least!"*

Steve paused as he finally unwound himself completely, his arm already postured to hang up the phone. He looked out at the snow, where something had clearly come through while he'd been sleeping.

Was it a code red? He thought of Billy's screams and of the smatterings of gore he hadn't wanted to see that had caused them when he'd delved into the cellar last night; thought of how he'd wandered alone like an idiot into a tunnel where no one had known he'd gone and where no one could help him if he'd needed it, and wondered how much longer he could survive trying to handle this all on his own.

Was it a code red?

"Yeah," he said quietly into the phone, closing his eyes against the horrific memories he'd forced himself to recall, hating that he was dragging his children into this with him, "yeah, man, I'd say it's a code red."

"Fuck," he heard Dustin whisper, and smirked a little when he overheard his mom begin to call him away from the phone. *"Alright, alright, I'm coming! This has been great Mike, but now I gotta go."*

"Right, yeah, so just radio me later. I'll tell you more about the 'session' then," Steve said, and hung up without waiting to hear Dustin's confirmation.

Steve floundered for a moment after the phone clicked into place, flexing his toes against the tight, cottony double-binding that held them. He needed to go outside, but his sneakers were still soggy and unwearable, if the puddle they were laying in under the kitchen table was any indication.

When his feet had returned to a normal coloration after being soaked, he hadn't thought about doing anything to his shoes to get them to dry properly. He'd scrounged awkwardly through Dustin's dresser for something warm to cover his feet with after he'd drained the bath, and had spent the night trudging about in too-small socks and Mrs. Henderson's bedroom slippers, worrying about Billy and Hopper in intermittent bursts; drying his shoes hadn't even crossed his mind at all.

Pulling on the coat he'd left hanging on the back of one of the kitchen chairs, he hustled back into the living room to retrieve the slippers he'd borrowed. Much like Dustin's socks, they were unfortunately too small to fully cover his feet and stopped just short of supporting his heel, but he was resolute in the fact that they would have to do. He shuffled over to the backdoor and unlocked the deadbolt with a heavy click to investigate the disturbance he'd spied from the kitchen.

He shivered against the cold and left the door open behind him as he awkwardly made his way closer to the trail, noticing with no small hint of relief that the tracks appeared to have been manmade and were recognizably human. Whatever comforts he took in that fact were unfortunately short lived when, as he finally came up close to the tracks, he noticed that there was blood mixed into the compacted snow where someone had come walking. It pooled primarily in the deep divot a heel leaves behind in a footprint, and it was no small amount.

Barefoot, Steve thought wearily. He was walking barefoot.

The bloody set of prints led straight to the doors of the cellar that had been left open wide, and there Steve hesitated, ignoring the fact that the slippers he was wearing were quickly growing cold and soggy.

He stopped by one of the open doors and stepped down onto the first step, taking care to not slip in the snow that had accumulated

overnight. Steve squinted into the gloom, not blind to the fact that the tracks led in, but none had yet come back up. The morning sun was casting its light down the narrow cellar corridor brightly, but in the places where its illumination couldn't reach, Steve thought he could barely make out the hint of a form submerged in the darkness. He took another cautious step down but stalled when he heard the sounds of something coughing hard, struggling to hack something up.

"Hargrove?" he called out unsurely, slowly descending further down the stairwell with one hand kept pressed to the cold, stone wall for support. "Hargrove, *please* say that's you down there."

A low groan, sounding miserably familiar and rough amidst the sounds of heaving was all the confirmation he needed. He hastened in his descent, nearly slipping on a few frozen steps when the traction-less rubber soles of the slippers he was wearing failed to grip anything, throwing all the caution he'd thus far been exercising to the wind to reach the bottom as quickly as he could. His mind and heart were racing when he finally got to the bottom, and there he found Billy, naked and heaving and hunched over in the dark.

"Oh, shit," Steve breathed out as he slowly drew nearer, his eyes roving over the pale expanse of Billy's exposed back. His legs were awkwardly tucked up underneath him, revealing the raw and bloodied bottoms of his feet. Across his back and trailing around to the front of his torso were multiple pink, raised marks that looked like freshly healed scars, but even as Steve studied them he could see that some of them were still glistening and open. The gashes were long and vicious, holding Steve's focus as Billy made another gross, wet retching noise. His body trembled as it heaved, prompting Steve into action.

"Fuck, are you alright?" he asked, but immediately chided himself for even asking; he could see quite clearly that he wasn't alright at all.

He awkwardly bent to kneel down beside him, unsure of what he could really do for him as Billy clutched his stomach and shook. Steve hesitantly reached out to rub his back in comfort as Billy struggled and heaved again, choking on the vomit that was finally beginning to bubble up in the back of his throat. Steve looked away in disgust as it dribbled out of his mouth, but continued to rub his

back dutifully in what he hoped was a soothing gesture.

His fingers bumped over the raised marks, subconsciously tracing them as he felt Billy's skin, noting how amazingly smooth and soft it felt, strongly reminding him of the way Nancy's skin got after she'd finished the exfoliating part of her beauty routine, leaving him to wonder if that wasn't due in part to Billy's skin being *new*.

The bile Billy was choking up was viscous in nature as he spit it out weakly. It was thick and red and clung to his lips before he began vomiting in earnest, his body curling forward as chunks of furred meat and splintered pieces of bone spewed from his mouth in a gruesome torrent, splashing messily on the floor before him. He coughed and spit raggedly, his body shivering all over as the muscles in his stomach clenched and drew loose repeatedly, tightening again and relaxing over and over in an attempt to finish purging everything he had in him. A seemingly endless amount of the unsavory mix of fur and bone spilled out of him, mixing with the red, bloodied juices that had coagulated onto the floor. Hearing Billy vomiting had Steve close to puking himself, an uncomfortable nausea settling in his gut as listened to the continued heaves until the delicate equilibrium of Billy's stomach was restored.

"What the fuck is this?" Billy eventually asked hoarsely, unable to keep the full-body tremble he was experiencing from shaking his voice when he spoke. "What the hell did I *eat*?"

Steve shook his head uncertainly, chancing a glance at the mess on the floor before quickly looking away again.

"When I found you, I think... I think it was a deer," Steve said, unsure if Billy would find that information to be comforting or not. Billy shuddered in response, shivering beneath Steve's touch.

It was hard having to witness Billy in such a vulnerable state; he was so *pale* and hairless and weakened that, if Steve hadn't known it *was* Billy beneath his hand, then he might not have been able to recognize him at all.

The change, at some point, had robbed Billy's skin of its remarkable tan, leaving his complexion woefully pale that bordered something

almost ghostly. Steve recognized the theft as a tragedy, but it was made worse seeing that Billy had lost all of his hair as well- not even his eyebrows had survived the shedding, and the curly, golden-brown hair that would've looked trashy on anyone else was scattered tragically around the room in a display almost as gruesome as the remnants of his discarded, ruined flesh.

Billy groaned again, low and deep as he tried to straighten out, bumping Steve's hand away. Long strands of saliva linked his lips to the muck on the floor, drawing Steve's attention back to the thrown up remains of whatever raw *thing* monster-Billy had feasted upon. He could feel the nausea rising in him again as the acidic smell of the vomit crept up his nostrils, and knew he had to move before he became as incapacitated as Billy, lest they both end up wasting the morning by wallowing in the cellar, incapable of taking care of each other.

He tore his gaze away from the fresh vomit and stood up, wiping his hands off on his jeans. He offered a hand down to help Billy up, but he didn't take it. Billy remained where he was, dazedly staring down into the mess that had come out of his stomach, shivering violently, though whether it was because of the cold or from the ruin and subsequent rebuilding of his body, Steve wasn't sure.

With nothing else to do, Steve stood by idly and watched as Billy spit whatever foul tasting saliva had gathered in his mouth onto the floor. When he realized he wasn't doing anything except *staring*, Steve wondered if Dustin's home could offer up anything for Billy to wear. The clothes he'd worn the night before lay in tatters at the bottom of the cellar stairs, his tight blue jeans ripped at the seams and the shirt he'd worn shredded into strips of fabric that not even all the kings horses nor all the kings men could hope to put together again.

"I'll be right back," Steve said, determined to at least *try* to find something for Billy to take cover in. It didn't seem as though Billy was ready to try moving yet anyway.

Billy didn't say anything as Steve turned away and left, walking up the stairs and into the morning light alone. He stared down into the muck of his sickness and tentatively reached up to feel his hairless head self-consciously, his hand shaking as he felt the smoothness of

his scalp. A whimper escaped him as he attempted to restrict his grief, silently mourning the loss of one of his greatest points of pride.

In the end, Steve ended up giving Billy his own shirt, awkwardly stripping it off in a way that didn't aggravate his injury as he swapped it out for his coat. The long-sleeved tee fit tightly across Billy's chest when he finally resigned to putting it on, defining his musculature well through the fabric in a way Steve's body couldn't. Steve tried to crack a joke about it being too small for him, but Billy didn't appear to be much in the mood to joke as he stood still and wearily took the rest of clothes that were handed to him, only ever making an apparent noise of disgust when Steve handed him Dustin's bathrobe.

"It's all I could find that'd fit, probably," Steve explained, hoping that Mrs. Henderson wouldn't notice that the ugly pink thing he'd found hanging on her bathroom door had gone missing. Billy held it at arm's length distastefully before begrudgingly wrapping it around himself, wearing it like a makeshift skirt as he tied it into place, pulling the soft pink belt that came with it into a tight knot on his hip.

There was nothing else Steve could offer him; Dustin was still only a kid whose clothes stood no chance at all of fitting Billy, and he didn't feel comfortable rooting through Mrs. Henderson's wardrobe to try and find anything better. It was ridiculous. Billy *looked* ridiculous, dressed in a bloodied shirt and pink skirt as he pulled his boots on over his healing feet, and under any other circumstances Steve would've made a point to laugh and make fun of the fact that he looked like a combat-ready Barbie, but as it was, Steve found that he was still having a hard time looking at him long enough to properly mock him.

He looked miserable and exhausted; ugly and humorous; the butt of a joke he'd spent his whole life avoiding by building his ego up until he'd become impervious to it all, but now his shell was cracked, and vulnerability seeped out of the fractures like a slow flood leaking out of a broken dam.

If Billy took notice of how strongly Steve was averting his gaze, he

didn't comment on it. In Steve's mind, he thought Billy was probably thankful for it as he wordlessly put on the black knit beanie Steve had scavenged out of Dustin's room to hide his bald head.

"You good?" Steve asked him quietly, watching as Billy adjusted the brim of the hat to cover as much as it could. Steve recognized the frailty Billy was trying to contain as it was quietly broadcast across the features of his face: it was in the way he kept blinking to prevent his eyes from watering up too much, and in the way his mouth twitched as he ran his tongue over his teeth repeatedly. It was in the way he couldn't even manage to hold himself upright, his body hunched over and weighted in the shoulders with weariness and fatigue.

Billy didn't answer, and Steve thought he could understand what his silence meant.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," he said after a moment, and let Billy lead the way out of the cellar and back into the house.

He appeared to have been recovering well enough, walking slowly but steadily with purpose until a severe wave of exhaustion struck him down almost as soon as they stepped through the door. He came close to collapsing after they stepped through the threshold and into the kitchen, but Steve was quick and intervened before he fell, taking hold of him as soon as he'd started to go down.

"Jesus fuck- Are you alright?" He asked in alarm, holding Billy awkwardly in his arms as he tried to regain his footing. He stumbled and nearly fell again as he jerked out of Steve's grip and eventually let himself be guided to the couch.

"Peachy," Billy muttered in delayed response, his vision blurring as he sat down. He sat still holding his head for a moment before leaning over onto his side, spreading out atop the cushions Steve had spent the night on and closing his eyes, desperate for rest.

"Wait, don't- you can't sleep here," Steve said pleadingly, hyper-aware of what time it was and how long they had until Dustin and his mom came home. "Look, we have to be out of here before eleven; I have to make a quick call first and then we have to haul ass outta here,

alright? Hargrove? Are you getting any of that?"

Billy didn't reply, already fast asleep.

Steve groaned miserably, feeling the weighted responsibility of what it might be like to be a single parent trying to raise a belligerent, lazy teenage son. All the same, Steve left him alone; he'd been through a lot, and if he needed a little bit of rest to recover, then he could spare him the five minutes it would take to leave a message for Hopper.

He was rubbing his forehead as he made his way back into the kitchen, kicking off the wet slippers that were no longer of any real use to him. Steve grabbed the phone's receiver from where it sat crookedly in its cradle and plugged in the number for the Hawkins police department, rehearsing what he planned to say in his head as he waited for the call to go through.

"Florence speaking for Hawkins P.D., is this an emergency?"

"Uh, hi, no, not an emergency; this is Steve Harrington, and I was just calling to leave a message for Hopper about-"

"About the dog he's been out all night trying to chase down, yes," she said, cutting him off curtly. *"I recognize your name. Your mom's show dog, is it?"*

"Yeah, yeah, real prized. Expensive breed, and all that. She was just- just *so worried* about him," Steve stammered, trying to fold himself naturally into the lie Hopper must have fabricated for the rest of the department to explain why it was so important that this dog be found. "But he came back about an hour ago, a little worse for wear but doing alright besides, so if you could just radio him or whatever that we found him-"

"What breed is it?"

"Uh, sorry, what?" Steve asked, eyes flitting to where Billy was effectively passed out on the couch. Mutt? Mongrel? Bully? What did Billy qualify as?

"I was just curious. It must be something really exotic if Jim decided to put himself on it instead of delegating it."

"Oh, well, you know," Steve said, mentally combing through the sparse list of dog breeds he knew, but nothing came up exotic enough to match the worth Florence had pinned on the imaginary dog. "It's just- it's just, uh, you know. A... a Dingo."

There was a long moment of silence from Florence's end that Steve used to mentally berate himself, slapping his palm to his forehead stupidly.

"A Dingo," Florence repeated dubiously. *"Your mother's prized show dog is an Australian Dingo?"*

"Ah, yep, that's right. We had him imported only a few months ago, actually. So if you could just pass that on to the chief for me, I'd be really grateful," Steve explained quickly, hating himself for not being able to quickly think up something more believable than a wild dog he'd learned about through Nancy coincidentally for some kind of a school report.

"Hold on kid, before you go, Jim left me a message to relay to you in the event you found your mom's 'Dingo' first."

Steve hesitated, feeling the warm flush of embarrassment colouring his face as he considered hanging up and ending the call prematurely to avoid any further humiliating remarks. He prayed that he'd never have to meet Florence in person. "Oh. Uh, okay. What'd he say?"

"He wanted me to let you know that in the event you found it first, he's going to want to drop in on you to see it and make sure it's alright. Asked me to take down your address for him, if that's okay by you."

"Oh, yeah, sure, no problem," Steve said, eyeing the ticking clock on the wall worriedly; it was already almost half-past ten. The day had just begun, and already he was beginning to feel the uncomfortable dregs of exhaustion flowing thickly through his veins.

Even so, he maintained politeness as he gave Florence his address and asked that his gratitude for all the hours Hopper had put in towards finding his 'dog' be forwarded to him via radio. He hung up quickly afterwards so she didn't have the chance to make another smart remark about his mother's alleged Dingo and sighed deeply,

wishing he could just go back to sleep and let matters handle themselves. He gathered up his shoes and prepared to leave.

It was tough getting Billy up after that; he was so bone-weary that Steve probably could've rolled him off the couch and dropped him onto the floor without waking him up. Seeing him like that reminded him of a time when he'd still been crowned 'King of Hakwins', when the only time he'd seen someone in a similar state of unconsciousness was when Tommy H. had gotten so shitfaced at one of his ragers that he'd passed out in the bathroom and wouldn't wake up for anything. As his body blocked access to the toilet, other partygoers had resorted to messily pissing over him before Carol had begged him to roll Tommy's prone form out of the way so he wouldn't be humiliated any further, and even then he hadn't woken up as he was effectively tucked up against the hard porcelain of the bathtub.

Looking down at Billy, Steve puzzled over how he was going to get him out of the house and into the car if he was truly as comatose as he feared he was. He could drag him out by the arms, probably, if he wasn't worried about up keeping a respectable appearance; he knew some of Dustin's neighbors, and wanted to keep in as good graces as he could manage with them, especially if it turned out they'd have need of the cellar again, but Billy was so dense that there might not be any other way.

Steve groaned loudly and looked around himself impatiently, wondering if there was some way he could rig together a possible sled or something to tow Billy out to the car with. Nothing in the living room jumped out to him as being particularly useful in that regard, though.

...What if he hit him? The thought came to him as he recalled some of the strategies his parents had employed on himself when he was younger. Sometimes, when he'd been hard to wake as a child, his dad would lightly (and sometimes not-so-lightly) slap at his face until he woke up. It was a startling technique, but maybe that was all Billy needed, and wouldn't it be fair, anyway? For all the times he'd hit Steve, one wake-up slap wouldn't be the worst he had coming to him. Steve raised his hand, aligned it with Billy's prone form, and stared down at him morosely.

He twisted his arm back, mentally readying himself for the shitstorm that would erupt if hitting him did end up working, but paused when his attention was captured in the same subtle way it'd been when he'd noticed something odd about the snow earlier. Steve blinked, frowned, and then lowered his hand, mesmerized by what he saw.

There was a darkness that had been forming in the skin above Billy's eyes while Steve had stood there pondering, slowly growing denser even as he continued to stare. He couldn't quite figure out what it was at first, but realization struck him harder than he'd wanted to strike Billy when he understood with some dull amazement that he was watching Billy's eyebrows slowly growing back in. It was very subtle, almost completely imperceptible, but the space above Billy's eyes was slowly filling out- with the exception of one small slant that curiously remained blank. Without thinking, Steve reached out to run a finger along the small bare patch of skin, unaware that Billy had had a scar there until now. He wondered how he got it as he let his finger continue along the ridge of his brow, slipping from the smooth groove of the scar to feel the slight prickle of the short growing hairs as they naturally followed the curve along the shape of his eyebrow arch.

This is good, Steve thought; it meant Billy's hair would grow back, given enough time, and for some reason he found that thought comforting. He'd be able to look at him again without feeling *guilty*, like Billy was suffering for some grave mistake Steve had caused.

Without really realizing what he was doing, Steve's gentle touch roamed away from his eyebrows, trailing down the length of Billy's soft face, rubbing over his cheek bone and down to his chin, feeling the smooth expanse of skin in an unwitting caress. He held his touch there for a moment before suddenly becoming aware of what he was doing, jerking his hand away as Billy began to wake, his startlingly blue eyes blinking rapidly up at him in exhausted confusion.

"We gotta go," Steve said, turning away in embarrassment and speaking far too gently. He cleared his throat awkwardly and repeated himself a little more insistently, a little more urgently. "Get up. We gotta go, Hargrove."

"Should I, like, drop you off somewhere?"

Upon leaving the Henderson's house, Steve realized a little ways down the road that he didn't actually know where he should be going. He'd only been to Billy's house once, and didn't know the way to it from Dustin's, or if that was even where Billy wanted to go. With the immediate threat of being caught by Dustin's mother averted, Steve had no preset destination in mind. Almost automatically, he began to navigate them in the direction of his own home with nowhere else to go.

"Like *where*," Billy snarled, eyes closed and forehead pressed firmly against the cold windowpane.

His condition hadn't improved since they'd left, and in some ways he actually looked worse. He was sweating hard, obviously riddled with nausea and trying not to bring attention to it. Every once in a while Billy's stomach emitted a terrible growl that would in turn make Billy groan. It made Steve nervous, afraid that he was going to start throwing up again at any moment.

He'd become remarkably tight-lipped again, as it seemed that talking was causing Billy discomfort. Whenever he did speak, he'd reach up to tentatively press his fingers along the sides of his jaw, slowly making his way to the underside of his chin, wincing slightly as though he had a bad toothache. Occasionally he'd open his mouth and stretch it in an awkward grimace, reaching in once or twice to feel something that must've been bothering him, but would stop quickly whenever he caught Steve watching him. Part of Steve had hoped that whatever weird behaviors being a werewolf had on him would stop now that the full moon had come and gone, but it seemed he'd been mistaken. There was no shortage of mysteries when it came to Billy Hargrove.

"I don't know, somewhere like your house?" Steve asked eventually, sighing heavily.

Billy mimicked his sigh as his stomach growled loudly again, rumbling insistently like a slow clap of thunder. It sounded uncomfortable. "Sure, Harrington, 'cause my dad would just *love* it if I rolled up with *you* looking like *this*," he bit out, leaning back in his

seat and gesturing to the pink thing tied around his waist. The slit of the gown exposed much more of his leg than Steve would've liked, running up the length of his thigh to frame it between the hem that laid squashed between the car seat and his leg. "Fuck it, maybe you should; he might actually pay you for getting my hair cut."

"It'll grow back," Steve said quickly, hearing the obvious melancholic tones of self-pity in his voice. Billy frowned and snorted, rubbing his jaw tenderly. "It will," he insisted, taking his eyes off the road for a moment to send a look Billy's way. "I mean, look: your eyebrows already have."

Once again, Steve thought he was being encouraging, but Billy didn't even check to see if Steve was being truthful. He opened his eyes and stared out at the passing scenery somberly, taking his hand away from his jaw and letting it fall flat in his lap.

"I want a shower," he said eventually, wrinkling his nose as though he could smell himself. "Fuck, and some mouthwash."

Having said this, Billy smacked his lips distastefully, drawing Steve's attention to his mouth as he tried to cleanse his pallet of the acidic remnants of his sickness.

"You can use mine," Steve offered, pulling his gaze away to re-focus on the road. "My shower. I have one."

"Gee, do you really?" Billy drawled quietly, his innate nature to be sardonic unhindered by his nausea or whatever pains he was experiencing. "Guess you know where you can drop me off, then, Harrington."

Steve clicked his tongue at the snide remark and rolled his eyes. "Smartass," he muttered, to which Billy cracked a small grin.

"Smartest one I know."

They didn't talk anymore after that, despite the many questions Steve wanted to ask now that Billy was conscious and capable of speaking. Could he remember anything that had happened after he'd

transformed and escaped? Where had he gone after he'd dragged *the other one* away? How far had they gone, and how had he known where to go when he'd turned back?

His questions sat on his tongue like an aftertaste that was too rich to swallow down, but he was too tired to ask them, and doubted if he currently had the mental fortitude to comprehend the answers if Billy chose to give him any. More so than trying to figure out what had happened over the course of the night, they needed to discuss what to do going forward now that they'd survived it. Back in the stifling comforts of Billy's living room, Billy himself had said he'd remain unconvinced of anything until something concrete happened, and it *had*- so what did they do with that information? What did *Billy* want to do now that he knew, for certain, what he was? Who did they get involved to help them, and what sort of help could they expect, exactly? What could anyone do for them that they couldn't do for themselves? Steve sighed heavily; he was far too young to be feeling this old.

They passed by Billy's Camaro on the way to his house, parked on the side of the road two streets away even though Steve had *told* him it was fine to park in the driveway because his parents wouldn't be home. But Billy had insisted, and had off-handedly thrown the conversation away from his weird parking habits to make fun of Steve's shirt that he was now wearing.

"Is that cop following us?"

Stirred from his thoughts, Steve glanced into his rearview mirror to see what Billy was talking about. Lo and behold, trailing a few hundred feet behind them, Steve recognized the bulky shape of Hopper's police truck trundling after them.

"Shit," Steve muttered, running a hand through his hair; he hadn't expected Hopper to come so soon. He was tired, goddammit; why couldn't the universe just give him five minutes to catch his breath before it set up the next hurdle? "Uh, yeah, kind of."

"Kind of," Billy repeated, turning his attention away from the side view mirror to glance at Steve mistrustfully. "What does 'kind of' mean?"

Steve took a deep breath as he let the BMW coast up his driveway, putting it in park and letting his head rest against the steering wheel to give himself a chance to just *breathe* for a minute. "It means he caught us- me, whatever- in the woods last night, and now he knows; he knows about *everything* and I think he wants to help," Steve explained, turning his head to the side to gauge Billy's reaction. For the most part he just sat there looking surprised, but Steve had expected him to look angry. "I think we *need* his help."

Billy frowned deeply and knit his eyebrows together. He looked like he had something he wanted to say, but his stomach let out another startlingly loud growl before he was able to say anything. He shut his eyes and groaned, slouching down into his seat as he gripped his stomach tightly.

"What *is* that, man?" Steve asked, addressing the concerning noises his gut was making as Hopper pulled up behind them. "Like, tell me honestly, are you hurt or about to shit yourself?"

"Shut the hell up Harrington, I'm fucking *hungry*," Billy moaned, and under all the stresses that Steve had accumulated, he hadn't expected that *feeding* Billy would be added to his pile of responsibilities. Steve's brows rose up as he stared and began to laugh, unable to help himself as he heard the door to Hopper's truck open and close.

He was laughing still in his seat when Hopper walked up to them, leaning down to look in at them through the window as Steve laughed loudly and uncontrollably, tears beginning to leak out of the corners of his eyes.